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Francis B. Nyamnjoh

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Francis B Nyamnjoh

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To all those who contribute knowingly and unknowingly...

Lilly Loveless sat staring at her Gmail inbox, on a cold winter morning in Muzunguland. Unlike other days, she had come in earliest of all the postgraduate students at the Muzunguland African Studies Institute at Bruhlville, because she was expecting an urgent email. Her co-supervisor in Livingstonetown had promised her the contact details of an African colleague at the University of Mimbo where she was seeking affiliation to do fieldwork for her PhD on 'Sex, Power and Consumerism in Africa.' She was excited and relieved, now that her research proposal had been successfully defended and the way cleared for her to undertake her second African visit. The Ethics Committee had given her a tough time and asked grilling questions about the dangers of voyeurism posed by her proposed study, but she eventually sailed through reassuringly.

Funding had been secured from the Ministry of Cooperation, the Royal Aids Foundation and the Michel Foucault Institute for the Study of Sexuality and Power. Riding high on her accomplishments and bubbling with prospects, Lilly Loveless was set to go.

All she needed was a letter of affiliation: these famous letters without which, so she had been told, Muzungulanders find it impossible to penetrate the bureaucracies of African ministries of research. 'No permit, no research', that's the maxim. Without a letter of affiliation she couldn't even aspire to get a visa from the Embassy of Mimboland, the country tied to the grants she had received. She had tried persuading the consular officer. This might have worked, had she not, most regrettably, boasted that she was after all injecting millions of Mim dollars into the struggling Mimbo economy, so "Why all the fuss?" Her attitude seemed to have toughened the resolve of the consular officer, who came short of screaming: "Forget your bloody money, arrogant...!" Now she knew only a letter of affiliation from Dustbin's collaborator at the University of Mimbo, bearing all the stamps and seals of approval, could deliver her visa.

She recalled reading, in Nigel Barley's *Innocent Anthropologist*, of similar experiences the author had had with the embassy of another African country, not too dissimilar to Mimboland. She stood up and looked through her bookshelf for the book, opened the relevant page, which she had dog-eared from her undergraduate Anthropology years and read.

How similar in their indifference to progress African countries are! And how insensitive to the need to protect even their own self-interest! To discourage potential visitors with such attitudes of callous indifference was worse than shooting oneself in the foot. Little had changed for the better, much for the worse.

Her experience of Africa was limited though, very limited. Apart from the masses of books she had read, books written mostly by Muzungulanders and by Africans whose knowledge of their continent was like a river humbled by the dry season, Lilly Loveless had had only a short two-week holiday experience of the lovely beaches of Sunsandland, one of the most exotic, exciting wonders of the tropics, dreams of which have kept many a Muzungulander going.

The email eventually came through. Lilly Loveless clicked and read:

Dear Lilly, the contact details of my Mimboland colleague whom I insist you meet as he has similar research interest to yours are:

Dr Wiseman Lovemore

Department of Social Work

University of Mimbo, Mimboland

Email: Wiseman.Lovemore@yahoo.com

Dr Wiseman Lovemore is a fascinating and accommodating fellow whom I am sure you will like. He isn't exactly international in terms of Google, but he is an intelligent man with solid convictions. I cannot locate his cell number, but his email address should suffice. Just email him your travel details, and if you are lucky and he checks his mail, which unfortunately he doesn't do often, he would most certainly go to fetch you at the airport. If you miss him for whatever reason, simply make your way to the university campus upon arrival – some 40 to 50 minutes away by taxi, in Puttkamerstown. Ask the first person you meet, and you should be taken to the Department of Social Work where Lovemore is as solid as an oak and the easiest person to find.

Safe trip and enjoy your fieldwork.

Best

Dustbin

Lilly Loveless started typing immediately.

Dear Dr Wiseman Lovemore,

My name is Lilly Loveless. I am a student reading Social Geography at the Muzunguland African Studies Institute, Bruhlville. I am writing to you about the research I'd like to carry out for my PhD over the next six months in Mimboland. I am writing courtesy of Professor Dustbin Olala, who has pressed me to contact you. Given your expertise on the subject I'd like to work on, I'd be really interested to hear your thoughts now and once I am on the ground. In a nutshell, I shall be investigating changing sexuality and power relations occasioned by growing obsession with material possessions and the desire to consume Muzungu products in a context of screaming poverty.

I am very interested in your work, which, I must admit, I haven't read but which your friend, my co-supervisor Professor Dustbin, thinks very highly of. The most recent thing by an African that I have read on this theme is the paper: 'Fishing in Troubled Waters: Disquettes and Thiofs in Dakar'. I would like to know what you think of this paper, which fascinated me, although the author writes as if African women are irredeemably consumerist and helplessly easy to manipulate by men of wealth and power. I can't say whether or not the situation he paints is real and widespread, but I could bring a copy of the paper along for you, if your library does not subscribe to *Africa*, the journal in which it was published. Indeed, it would be a huge honour if we could meet up to discuss the topic as soon as I arrive...

She was full of questions. First, she urged and pleaded with him to

send her an urgent letter of affiliation, duly signed by the Vice Chancellor of the university. Failure of which, the letter must be signed by the Dean. She also had questions about where to stay.

"Sorry to bombard you with all these questions," she wrote, "but as I am sure you can understand, I would like to do as much groundwork as possible before I get out there. Finding accommodation is a critical part of this. I would really appreciate it if you could be so kind to make necessary arrangements for me in this regard as soon as possible because I am very worried about having adequate accommodation."

She equally wanted to know if Dr Wiseman Lovemore knew of any NGOs "that have sexuality, consumerism, empowerment and gender transformation as particular goals," that she could contact. "I would ideally like to present case studies on two or more such organizations, in order to gain a critical understanding of the relative success and influence of non-state actors with the phenomenon."

She concluded her email with, "I cannot thank you enough. I look forward to hearing from you soon," signed it off, and clicked 'Send'.

Dr Wiseman Lovemore replied sooner than Lilly Loveless had feared: "I look forward to welcoming you to Mimboland, although I'm unable to think up possible accommodation for you right now."

In truth, he didn't even want to try. Still fresh was a recent experience with another female Muzungulander student who arrived only to accuse a colleague, who had bent over backwards to accommodate a similar request, of having acted dishonestly by conniving to stick her into an expensive mildewed "rat hole."

So he wrote: "If I find nothing before your arrival, here are the names and prices of a few hotels for you to choose from ... It rains round the clock here this time of year, so expect the rooms to be damp and mouldy ..."

He was not unaware of the fact that even zero star hotels such as those he had recommended are exceedingly more expensive than living with a family or renting a place, but he simply wouldn't allow his efforts to be rewarded with ingratitude.

"You could always find more appropriate lodging once on the ground."

With regard to NGOs he didn't want to discourage her by saying he lacked faith in them. Instead he said she could easily link herself to one or several on arrival, as "Mimboland is a place where NGOs are formed and deformed on a daily basis", and "the University of Mimbo has even employed the services of a fulltime money doubler to liaise with mushrooming NGOs that wither away like blighted plants."

Then he gave her the good news: "Find attached a letter of invitation, not affiliation, signed not by the VC, not by the Dean, but by the HOD. It is the best I can do for you. Hope it works..."

And as a special favour to his friend Professor Dustbin Olala, he offered to meet her at the Sawang International Airport, "if you send me your flight details in time, and if the Internet gods are good humoured. In any case, look out for a man with your name on a placard."

"Safe trip and he clicked.

The next week for Lilly Loveless was one of hectic preparations for what her mom worriedly termed "Lilly's impending African misadventure."

In a way, her mom was right to. The first and only time she ventured into Africa for two weeks of vacation, Lilly Loveless came back with a few screws rearranged. Her choice of music had changed overnight into appreciation for wild drumming. She had plaited her lovely curly hair into dozens of little braids. She had practically forgotten her boyfriend of two years. All reasons why her mother would rather she went elsewhere to do her fieldwork.

"Tribal communities are all over the third world, why your fascination with Africa?"

"Mom, you too much," Lilly Loveless would say, whenever her mother went on and on about the need to rethink her choice.

"And I am right to," her mom would persist. "Africa is too dangerous for a young woman on her own. See what happened between you and ..."

"Africa had nothing to do with it," Lilly Loveless would interrupt her mom. "The relationship would have ended with or without what happened in Sunsandland."

Her mother would shut up only to resume yet again, at the next mention of Mimboland. But Lilly Loveless had made up her mind, and there was no turning back.

* * *

The Air Mimbo flight was hitch free. The few women on the flight with Lilly Loveless were black, elegantly dressed, heavily jewelled, and mostly wore artificial hair grafted into their own hair or as wigs. The majority of Lilly Loveless's co-passengers however were men, mostly black Africans, with only a handful of whites whom she thought were businesspeople, development agents, international civil servants, or husbands of Mimboland ladies. There were a few Arabs as well, mostly Lebanese – was her guess – if the literature on these parts of Africa was to be believed. And there were Chinese as well, lots of them, of whom the Muzungulander media had become so jittery of late, posing as they do, as the new conquerors of the consumer world. She imagined each of them with 'Made in China' stamps in their briefcases, ready to conquer every city and every village in Africa.

Lilly Loveless did not regret her "courageous" decision to fly African. Her initiation into Mimbo ways started just as she had wished. Already, she had drank three cans of Mimbo-Wanda, the country's most popular beer with its trendy, pacesetting, football-loving, Internet-crazy, cell phone conscious, vivacious youth, thanks to the friendly stewardess, Yoyette, who was keen on making her feel at home. She attracted Yoyette's attention while standing at the back of the plane, watching the stewardess make coffee, as she waited for another passenger to finish up in the toilet. In her smart Air Mimbo outfit, Yoyette moved around the small kitchen opening this miniature metal cabinet and closing it securely before turning to open another. Lilly Loveless could not help remarking, "You girls sure do know how to manoeuvre in small spaces." The stewardess paused, gracefully holding a small coffee cup by its handle, turned, and looked Lilly Loveless up and down, and back up, and said slowly, "We sure do, pretty." And they bonded instantly.

Lilly Loveless sat next to an elderly man with a fulfilled belly – politician by profession or aspiration. "You've got lovely blue eyes and nice curly blonde hair," the man told her. He kept insisting she must come and study in Nyamandem the capital city instead, because, to his mind, no serious

knowledge ever comes from the periphery, not to mention a rat hole like Puttkamerstown. "Nothing that matters happens in backyards," he said repeatedly, licking his lips as if he had smeared them with honey. "Truth hails from the centre, falsehood from the margins," he claimed, and with the fullness of his eyes, he protruded onto her face, "That you should know, being from the mother of all centres." What made her slightly uncomfortable was the way he splashed his sneezes and coughs as if everyone around him wanted his showers of blessings.

On her other side, at the window, sat a thin light-skinned black woman in a colourful lacy top that exposed her midriff, tight-fitting jeans, and big gold loop earrings. Her straightened shoulder length hair with waves almost overwhelmed her small face but with stunning effect. Before takeoff, she worked frantically on her laptop. Then she spoke on her cell phone in a rapid stream alternating between languages and interspersed with "Bisous, bisous." Later, over a meal, Lilly learned she had just completed a degree in reproductive health in Muzunguland where her mother was originally from, and was now returning home to Mimboland to take up a post to train in HIV/AIDS prevention. When Lilly asked her how she lived her 'métissage' the woman replied that these days, even if it doesn't show in the skin we are all mixed somehow.

The descent to Sawang International Airport was breathtaking. The plane plunged gently through the clouds, revealing a vast and extensive sea of green in glorious synchrony with the sleeves of the Atlantic Ocean. This was the once virgin rainforest Lilly Loveless had only read about or seen in documentaries on TV. Even with the pride of its virginity gone, the balding rainforest was still a rare environmental hope in a world busy writing cheques the environment couldn't possibly cash. The sooner more and more people understood that one can only command nature by obeying it, the better for all and sundry. Her heart flowed out to the mangroves below and to the shorelines of the beach to the east, full of colourful fishing boats and people in screaming attires. But her enthusiasm was tempered just as they approached the runway – a maze of grey shacks rose from the swamps like a nightmare. Greyer, because of the rain.

The landing was smooth.

After touchdown, the woman to her right offered Lilly Loveless a box of 250 condoms, saying "life's too sweet and too short to waste". Lilly Loveless broke out into a big smile and thanked her for the timely gift, having forgotten to bring some along despite repeated insistence by her reluctant mom. The woman also handed her a business card saying, "Don't hesitate to give me a call if you need something while in Mimboland." What a lofty mission she had! In a continent already devastated by lords of war, it made all the sense in the world to snatch what was left of life from the jaws of HIV/AIDs with laudable actions like hers.

"A few thunder clouds shouldn't dampen your enthusiasm," the man to her right told Lilly Loveless, giving her his card, on which he had added by hand his personal cell phone number. As they separated, he whispered to her with his eyes, "I'm waiting for you in Nyamandem. Call me." She looked at the card which had a Nyamandem address on one side and a Muzunguland address on the other: "Honourable Epicure Bilingue", she read with a shake of her head, as if to say "What a name!"

If there was one thing Lilly Loveless regretted with the start of her Mimboland adventure, it was the fact that in her rush to get to the airport in time, she had forgotten to bring along her yellow booklet of vaccines. As a result she was detained by a no-nonsense health official at the Sawang International Airport who forcefully administered injections which he refused to accept she had had just days before.

"How do you expect me to believe that? Show me your card!" The man blared, making her feel like a child lying in broad daylight. She would not be allowed to contaminate the land of Mimbo with yellow fever, cholera and meningitis. And she paid for the vaccines at a rate more than exorbitant in money, comfort and time. The whole exercise took nearly two hours, making her virtually the last passenger to come through from immigration to the baggage area.

The scorching heat, humidity, poor ventilation and the officials' undisguised reluctance to be understanding compounded the stifling feeling in Lilly Loveless.

By the time she had finished oiling the thick dry lips of the two lady customs officers who had insisted on looking beneath her mom's dirty XXL underwear, which she had packed on top precisely to deter such a meticulous item by item search for God-knows-what, Dr Wiseman Lovemore, a man not gifted in patience by any standards, had given up waiting and left the airport. So Lilly Loveless, seeing no placard with her name, succumbed to the aggressive persuasion of a determined taxi man and implored: "University of Mimbo, Puttkamerstown, s'il vous plait."

"Yi please me time no dey," the taxi man sought to reassure her, mimicking her whiteman-woman accent, the way a child would with its fingers to the tip of its nose singing: "Whiteman with your long nose, since ma mother born me I no ba see me whiteman ..." "You go pay Mim\$40,000," he told her.

"That's too much," she screamed. "I look for another taxi!" Dustbin had forewarned her against the exorbitant rates of the opportunistic taxi men in Sawang.

"La distance est longue. Puttkamerstown faway. Na ara kontri," he tried to explain.

She was adamant; the amount was just too much.

"So na how much you go pay?" he asked.

"Wait a minute," she told him, taking out her notebook. She consulted it, then said, "Not more than Mim\$10,000." That's the amount Dustbin had advised her not to go over.

"No, no. Dat moni small plenty. No man for here go take you to Puttkamerstown for dat amount." The driver swore. "You pay Mim\$20,000 or you take ara taxi if you see am."

Lilly Loveless studied the pros and cons of wasting more time haggling with a second, and perhaps a third and fourth taxi man, and concluded she was better off yielding. "Let's go," she sighed.

"But if road long, and traffic dey, you go pay more, foseka petrol dear," the driver insisted as she entered the car.

She pretended not to understand what he said, but was determined not to pay a cent more.

"Your safety belt is unsafe," said Lilly Loveless, as she discovered the

belt had been cut into two halves.

"Na all dat I get... No fear," he told her.

The taxi man was far from reassuring. Once he started driving, he seemed to head straight for the potholes perforating the battered roads. In his equally battered Toyota Corolla that had no shock absorbers to cushion the tortuous ride, they trotted along as if on a hoofless horse. The front and back windshields of the car were splattered with adverts, including one which touted, "My Toyota Is Fantastic."

More like "My Toyota is in Plastic," Lilly Loveless thought, hardly bringing herself to appreciate the irony the way she ordinarily would. To be fair though, one could have the slickest car in the world, but with roads as rubbish as this, there's little to do but pull, dive and stumble along. Just then, she noticed a very slick car proving the point.

Lilly Loveless was amazed by the crater size potholes made worse by pools of muddy rainwater. This was testing to the limit her philosophy of 'wetter is better', especially as the splashes made by the passing cars stank like sewage. Rotting refuse mountains at the corner of every street were colonised by swarms of flies, maggots and rats nonchalantly fattening themselves up. Lilly Loveless and the taxi man went through swampy neighbourhoods, where the car gathered mud and children struggled with floating household refuse and sewage, as if in a sort of fashion parade. The car, which already smelt oddly, picked up more nauseating stench as the tires grew thicker with mincemeat of unattended waste. At one point, she thought she saw a man lying in the middle of the road, perhaps dead, but no one bothered to stop and help, her own driver included. She fumed, but conversation between them was difficult, as what the taxi man said seemed to suggest the man was catching up on sleep in preparation to lose sleep as a night watchman.

If she hadn't done her background reading, she might have thought Sawang had been at the heart of a savage war and bombing in which chaos had mass murdered order. She knew Mimboland as the peaceful armpit of a turbulent Africa, and now she was being forced to reappraise what the books had told her by the bumpy reality of a city hardly at peace with itself. The city's roads and refuse had been totally neglected, just as the air conditioning, toilets and other facilities at the nightmare of an airport. It was as if Mimboland had gone for decades without a government, for not even a warzone devastated by warlords and years of reckless abandon could look this miserable and disabled.

She was glad to be heading for Puttkamerstown, as she simply couldn't stand Sawang.

Though empathetic to him, Lilly Loveless was also suspicious that the taxi man was not in a hurry to bring her to her destination. He exasperated her with his backstreet options, indirections and indecisions, but she was too scared to put her foot down. The car lurched along bumpily, yet no university was in view.

At one point, the taxi man stopped abruptly and turned to her. "Whosai you say you di go?" he asked. It was evident he either didn't know the University, or he was simply eating up time in the hope of squeezing even more out of her.

"University of Mimbo!" she screamed and rolled her eyes, barely

containing her mounting impatience. She could see he looked equally perplexed. She gathered courage and forced him to ask for directions.

"That's far away from here, way out of the city," a bendskin rider told them. "You're in the wrong place, wrong direction," the man looked questioningly at the taxi man, as if asking what he was doing with a taxi in a city he mastered so little. "Turn left, left again at the first roundabout, drive straight ahead for three hundred metres or so, make a right turn after the mango orchards, and drive on, looking out for the signposts for directions."

Lilly Loveless took down notes, not sure her driver understood a thing. She would guide him. They thanked the Good Samaritan bendskin rider, and made a U-turn.

Lilly Loveless could see there were hundreds of motor bike riders like the one who had given them directions. They were picking up and dropping off passengers, apparently much abler to negotiate the potholes and traffic than the taxis that competed with them. She also noticed people on bicycles, some with crates of eggs mounted behind them. They seemed to ride so nonchalantly, unaware of the risk that, with one too-quick movement of the handlebars, a whole day of earnings could be smashed to the pavement in white and yellow glowing and moving globs punctuated by broken shells.

There was this lady, mounted on her bike, doubtless on her way to somewhere important, as she was not stopping for passengers. Lilly Loveless admired the strapless top she wore, made of a print fabric with leopard and tiger designs combined. Her two-toned braids matched her top. Some were gathered loosely on the back of her head while others tumbled to grace the space between her bare shoulders. Her long brown trousers were wide and her heels, braced against the pavement briefly for traffic to ease up, were high. Her handbag waited obediently over the handlebar of her bike...

There were lots of people on foot as well, furious and provocative in their busy-ness. The stench emitted by the farting gutters and refuse mountains made them spit in the streets as if in a spitting competition.

A few kilometres on, a nervous Lilly Loveless asked in silence: "Didn't he turn the wrong way again?" Not to, said a voice in her, he'll find his way.

Whatever the sights of Sawang and its inhabitants, Lilly Loveless' mind was firmly on her fate. She was full of anecdotes about the unpredictability of this land of Mimbo, and it appeared the Mimbo people themselves made no secret of the attribute, as they would proudly proclaim: "Nothing is impossible in Mimboland."

Lilly Loveless couldn't contain her joy when the taxi man, after an hour and a half of countless contours and detours, eventually stopped at the entrance to the university still under active construction. A white banner held together by wooden poles and scaffolding had "University of Mimbo" inscribed in bold black letters, followed by "The Place to Be" in a much, much smaller font, almost impossible to read from any distance. She made a mental note of the contrast. She would ask Dr Wiseman Lovemore if there was more to the inscription than met the eye, although she had read somewhere that young Mimbolanders were reluctant to study at home, preoccupied as they were with dreams of seeking authentic qualifications from Muzunguland. A tall fence was being constructed around the university campus. This also she made a mental note of. She had read that this twenty-year-old university was

one of the youngest in Mimboland, but she didn't know it was this fledgling, if her eyes and first impressions were to be trusted.

The plainclothes, casually dressed security guard in rubber sandals inspected the documents of the taxi man but would not touch the passport Lilly Loveless instinctively tendered him. "No need," he smiled, and let them through.

"Dis na university, farm for book people," said the taxi man, half serious, half mocking.

Lilly Loveless smiled comfortably for the first time since the airport.

"Whosai you wan maka drop you?"

"Department of Social Work," she said, fidgeting with her trousers to untie her money belt.

The guard indicated the way and the taxi man proceeded to the Faculty of Social Sciences. "Ma road end for ya," he announced, stretching out his hand.

Lilly Loveless handed him Mim\$20,000, a stiff look in her eyes.

He got the message, thanked her, and drove away, a broad smile on his face. Even without the bonus he had hoped for, he was satisfied to have met a client who paid generously. Neither his wife nor his girlfriend would call him "Japanese handbrake" today. But first, he would head for the nearest kiosk to place his bet and hope on his favourite Muzunguland horse, and then prepare himself to watch the race on TV, sponsored by Pari Mutuel Urbain Mimbolandais.

It didn't take Lilly Loveless long to locate Dr Wiseman Lovemore. He was quite well known – a solid presence on campus à la Dustbin. The first person she asked was able to take her right to his office, where he was explaining to a female student behind closed doors aspects of a lecture she had either missed or not understood, or had insisted on having as a private tutorial.

This would never happen in Muzunguland, a lecturer alone with a female student in his office, with the door closed, the thought crossed Lilly Loveless' mind as she introduced herself.

Short, thick, big-headed, almost neck-less, and with eyes like a butterfly in a flower garden, Dr Wiseman Lovemore welcomed his guest with a smile, his mind at work – a hunter contemplating his tools in the face of game. He fumbled between an offer of tea and a seat, as he dismissed the student, mumbling something about continuing the exercise later.

Lilly Loveless was keener on sorting things out right away, so she declined the tea, which normally she would have loved, as the weather was chilly and tea with her was a way of life.

"Sorry we missed each other at the airport," Dr Wiseman Lovemore shook hands with her warmly, slightly uncomfortable with her height and sharp, blue eyes that seemed to absorb everything they settled on. "I thought you were not on the flight, since I waited and waited..."

"I was delayed at immigration and customs, details of which I won't bore you with."

"Hope you didn't have any problem finding a taxi..."

"Let's not talk about the taxi either. Can you believe it? I get into one and ask to be taken to the University of Mimbo. The taxi man has no clue where this is, but insists on taking me, only to drive round and round.

Luckily we asked someone who showed him the way at last."

"Thank God he brought you here in one piece. It could be worse."

"I'm not complaining."

"I see you are married," remarked Dr Wiseman Lovemore, abruptly.

Lilly Loveless looked at the gold ring on her finger and smiled, but said nothing. She didn't know how to begin to tell him her mother had insisted upon the ring as a way of keeping prying and preying African men at bay.

"I know you must be tired. A quick tour of the department and the faculty, then we go," said Dr Wiseman Lovemore, picking up his bag and leading the way.

He did a quick round of introductions in the building that housed the Department of Social Work and Faculty of Social Sciences before taking her in his car to drive round the expansive, impressive but very underdeveloped campus of the University of Mimbo.

Again, the fence under construction caught Lilly Loveless' attention.

"This is a long and expensive fence in the making you've got here," she remarked.

"Yes, and a controversial one too."

"What do you mean?"

"Opinion is divided and there's lots of tension in the air," he whispered. "That's all I can say for now. More when we are out of here."

Lilly Loveless nodded. Dustbin hadn't mentioned a thing about how paranoid Mimbolanders were. Or was Dr Wiseman Lovemore being overly dramatic and mysterious about the fence?

They drove back, packed his car "because petrol is damn expensive, and there is too little of it in the car. I'm just a poor lecturer."

She smiled knowingly this time. Dustbin and others had already prepared her for this and a lot more.

"Financially, how we survive here at UM is difficult to say," Dr Wiseman Lovemore unfolded his poverty. "All I know is that we beat Christ when it comes to miracles."

Lilly Loveless took the cue. She would have to babysit him financially, if they were to socialise.

They both jumped into a taxi, with Lilly Loveless stating upfront that she would pay, which slightly wounded Dr Wiseman Lovemore's ego, but he didn't protest. They headed for Mountain View Hotel, where he had reserved a room for her for the first few days of her fieldwork.

The girl at the reception was fair in complexion and youthful. She had a sweet face and her dimples were merry. Lilly Loveless noticed her lips as well, poised gently and firmly, one luscious lip on the other, together they spoke even when no words moved them. Covered in a creamy gloss that let their deep natural glowing brown colour show, the girl's lips warmed you just by looking. One turned up at an impressive angle and the other sharply down, accentuating the line that separated and brought them together.

The girl herself seemed unaware of the arresting power of those prominent lips proudly protruding. She introduced herself as Britney, part-time receptionist and full-time student, studying during the day and working evenings. "You are welcome to Mountain View." She handed Lilly Loveless a form. "You can stay as long as you like. We are not expensive and there aren't

many customers in any case."

Lilly Loveless smiled to herself, wondering if her employer would keep her if he heard her.

Dr Wiseman Lovemore helped Lilly Loveless to her room with her luggage and returned to wait in the dingy reception lounge while she showered.

When she came back downstairs, she looked fresh and had changed into a pair of jeans and a white shirt. She was carrying a sweater.

"I didn't know it would be this cold in the heart of the tropics," she told Dr Wiseman Lovemore, as she put on her sweater.

"It must have escaped Dustbin, for Puttkamerstown is generally a cold place, all year round. It used to be worse before the university was created. Since then, there has been a population explosion that has made the town slightly warmer. Lots of people farting into the air..."

"Where did you say we were going?"

"I thought I should welcome you with a drink and something to eat, if that is OK with you."

"Good idea."

"Let's go to Mountain Valley, a place I know well."

"Mountain Valley?"

"It's a restaurant, a drinking place, and also ..." he laughed.

"What?"

"It is also a resting place." He was smiling mischievously.

"Resting place?"

"Yes, where men and women go to rest."

"You mean sugar daddies and sweat mamas... where they bring their catch?"

"I couldn't have stated it any better." Dr Wiseman Lovemore thought to himself, this woman is dynamite, much more than meets the eye.

"Interesting, definitely a place worth discovering. The perfect start to my fieldwork."

Mountain Valley was a walking distance from Mountain View. Rich in vegetation including a healthy abundance of flowers both wild and tended, the landscape attracted Lilly Loveless. If there was one thing in Mimboland to command her resilience and plead for forgiveness for all the sins of Sawang, she was sure it was the scenery of Puttkamerstown. There was the overarching Mount Mimbo, with all its hypnotic majesty, impressive and mystical like the chariot of the gods, to crown it all. Luckily the skies were clear, allowing the mountain to throw off its dark and white blanket of rain clouds and reveal the fullness of its beauty to welcome her eyes, marvel and sense of spectacle. She felt good, like a tropical flower that cannot blossom without the sun. Instinctively, she made the sign of the cross, and thanked the stars, which was significant, for she was neither Christian nor religious. A worshipper of nature maybe, nothing more.

Dr Wiseman Lovemore told her of the mountain race, an international event that takes place every year in the month of February, and that entails running up to the top of the 5000 metres high mountain and back. She was impressed by his lengthy account of how a local female participant who habitually races barefooted and hardly looks her age had been crowned "Mountain Hare" for winning more times than anybody can remember. Lilly

Loveless felt tempted to take part in the next race, even if it meant only going as far up as the Upper Eden or Stop One, of what Dr Wiseman Lovemore said was a three-stop-race to the top. The mountain was full of gods, she was told, who needed constant attention, and who were known for showing displeasure once in a blue moon by coughing out red hot fire so vicious it could swallow whole villages.

Lilly Loveless had the feeling Dr Wiseman Lovemore was addressing the anthropologist in her by talking of gods and fire instead of volcanoes. She made no comment as a social geographer.

They walked past several relics of Muzunguland colonialism, which Dr Wiseman Lovemore, not a tourist guide by any stretch of the imagination and neither overly romantic about the past or keen on sightseeing, did his utmost to bring home to Lilly Loveless, whom he was determined to impress. There was the Bismarck Fountain, which had long ceased to flow, just like Bismarck after Willem II became Kaiser. There was the prestigious Lodge, initially constructed by Puttkamer as a birthday present for a daughter of the soil who had mastered the needs of his heart. A significant symbol of power or powerlessness in a way, the lodge had been passed down first to the Prime Minister of West Mimboland, then to the President of the Federal Republic as a federal palace, and finally to President Longstay of the United Republic as a Regional rest house, which in effect meant an end to occupancy, as Longstay hardly ever saw the need to venture into the periphery. He is famously known to have proclaimed recently when the country was up in flames with thirst for various freedoms: "Democracy is a very expensive disease; we feel better when it is cured. As long as Nyamandem breathes, Mimboland is alive." To mark the solitude, disuse and neglect the Lodge now enjoys, the clock which had been faithful throughout the history of colonial presence ceased to tick in 1972. It is rumoured that President Longstay dreamt with such conviction that federalism was a wasteful nightmare that the clock ceased to tick in evidence. So, tourists, when they get close enough, can see that the clock's hands are stuck at 5.45 – dawn or dusk they can't tell, but who cares?

They came to the colonial graveyard, which Lilly Loveless said she must see, but which Dr Wiseman Lovemore was cold about, given his conviction that the dead must not be disturbed. So he stood by the main road while she went to see. She counted the number of graves, wrote down in her notebook the names on the tombstones, and placed the colourful leaves of a nearby plant on the grave closest to her as a symbolic wreath.

"There are twelve of them," she said, upon rejoining Dr Wiseman Lovemore. "What do you imagine they died of?"

"Illness, probably. Malaria," he didn't know for sure. "There was a war between the local population and the Muzungulanders who came seeking their land and taking over their lives," he added. "But there were not that many casualties. So it must have been to the mosquito that they finally succumbed."

"Probably. I'll find out from the Archives."

"Much as nature lured the Muzungulander to Africa, nature also had a way of cutting down to size their fantasies. If it wasn't disease, it was tough terrain that made it particularly difficult for them to penetrate and humble the heart of darkness. And many fell by the wayside, thanks to these

hazards."

"If there is any truth in what you say, the Archives will be able to tell me."

"I can see you swear by the Archives," said Dr Wiseman Lovemore, half mockingly. "I'll show you the Archives tomorrow. It is too late to go there today, as it is long past office hours."

"No hurry."

"It is curious isn't it?"

"What?"

"That your Muzunguland forefathers in Mimboland should survive the war but fall to the mosquitoes. This means that both were involved in the liberation struggle. We might never have had our independence had the mosquitoes not joined in the struggle," he chuckled.

"Interesting perspective," was all Lilly Loveless could say. She had never thought of things in that light.

"Do you know why they fell to the mosquito?"

"No," said Lilly Loveless. "Do you?"

"I read somewhere that when they came, they did not manage more than a bed of radishes, when all sort of vegetables do so well here and elsewhere in the region," said Dr Wiseman Lovemore. "They depended on tasteless tinned foods instead of scratching the soil to grow food..."

"What has that got to do with dying from mosquitoes?" Lilly Loveless interrupted.

"Can't you see? Dependence on canned foods means that your forebears did not keep gardens, and no gardens meant that they lived surrounded by bushes, and therefore mosquitoes."

"Clever thinking," Lilly Loveless agreed.

"Their failure to domesticate their surroundings led to the mosquito showing them pepper, which is why I believe there ought to be a monument in honour of the mosquito, in every African country," he went on.

Lilly Loveless was a bit irritated.

"Yes," he insisted. "We need a monument to the mosquito, in the public square!"

"That reminds me." Lilly changed the topic in exasperation. "Could we pass by a pharmacy for me to pick up some mosquito repellent spray?"

"My pleasure."

Lilly Loveless did not wake up until about noon. The unpleasant experiences of Sawang had given her nightmares, pushing sweet dreams of the beautiful moments of Puttkamerstown towards dawn. She lay in bed an extra while, listening to the welcoming sound of music by birds perched on trees just outside the window of her room. This is a real paradise for tropical desires – a place where dreams, reality and fantasies converge, she told herself, getting out of bed with reluctance.

She hurriedly took a shower. Normally, she would dwell in the shower for longer, getting to know and relate to her body, but that must wait for later. She pulled on a pair of white trainers and put on over her head a brown short sleeve shirt, which she decided was best left hanging loose. Then she rushed out of the room and down the stairs to the reception, with her rucksack over one shoulder.

A smiling young man with a sweet face had taken over from the girl of the night before.

Lilly Loveless could see she had missed breakfast. She had also missed an appointment with a possible landlady. Dr Wiseman Lovemore had put her in touch with a colleague of his they met at Mountain Valley last night, who had a Boy's Quarters to rent, and they had agreed she would pass at 10:30am to see the accommodation.

"Any message for me?" she asked the smiling receptionist.

"Yes, two in fact," he replied, fetching the messages.

"I suppose I'm too late for breakfast."

"Breakfast is not part of the room," the young man explained, "but we can make you breakfast anytime, and charge you accordingly, the same way we do lunch and dinner."

"Just a cup of strong black coffee will do," she replied, and made her way to the restaurant, situated by a disused swimming pool.

There she sat and read her messages to the sweet music of the birds.

The first message was by the landlady who, not wanting to interrupt Lilly Loveless' sleep, chose to leave her cell phone number for her to call and make a new appointment. The second message was a missed call from Dr Wiseman Lovemore. He said he was waiting for the shops to open to pick up a SIM card and prepaid airtime for her before coming. He also wanted her to call him, if possible, to specify how much airtime to buy.

He'll sort something out, she thought. Any amount of airtime should suffice for a start. She just wanted to be able to call her mom to let her know her daughter arrived safely in Mimboland. The rest could be sorted out later. She decided to just enjoy her coffee and wait for him to come. And, changing her mind about breakfast, Lilly Loveless ordered a Spanish omelette and some toast.

Her mind went back to last night at Mountain Valley, a truly social place which she would like to visit again and again just to watch the comings and goings of men and women, young and old, for drinks and dinner, and for lots more, as was repeatedly whispered in her ear, in a mischievous sort of way, by Dr Wiseman Lovemore. That "lots more," was what she was here to uncover, understand and perhaps explain, and she would leave no stone

unturned to do just that. She remembered asking Dr Wiseman Lovemore where some of the customers who flocked in disappeared to, once they had ordered their drinks and roasted meat or chicken, grilled fish or something else to eat.

Enjoying the way the conversation was going, he expounded: "Like I said before, Mountain Valley is more than just a restaurant or a drinking place. It is also a resting place. The restaurant and bar are a front for the real business of the place, which takes place in the rooms behind – 20 or so in all – for between 3000 and 5000 Mim dollars an hour. The rooms all have fancy names like Bijou, Aroma, Begonia, Blissful, Pure Delight, New Dimensions, Fantasy Space, Passions, Tia Maria, and Simply Gorgeous. And there is always a long waiting list," he laughed. "Clients who want little more than a quickie can go for half an hour, and pay much less. But that depends on the mood of the guy behind the counter."

The culture of resting at Mountain Valley, like everywhere else in Mimboland, Lilly Loveless was told, demands that the couple arrive like perfect strangers, and leave like perfect strangers. First, they walk or drive in separately, preferably to a pre-booked room under their aliases if they are regulars or really big guns protective of their identities. Everything is served them in the room, and when they are through, they take side doors, or walk out through the front door, not as a couple, but separately, and at long intervals. If you are not a regular or a big person, and if you have little to fear, then you go through normal registration at the front desk where a key is given to you.

These were early days, but it was her hunch that Dr Wiseman Lovemore was not an easy character to pigeonhole. One thing about him of which she was convinced was his very calculating nature, even when most helpful and friendly.

She recalled how, as soon as they were seated, Dr Wiseman Lovemore opened his bag and handed her a paper that she could almost swear he had brought along to the airport to welcome her with.

"What is it?" she inquired with her eyes, taking the paper.

"Mbomas and Girls in Mimboland: Why Married Men Date University Girls," he pointed to the title.

She started flipping through the paper, but stopped abruptly. A golden rule in fieldwork: one must not allow the ideas of an insider analyst to influence one's outlook as an objective observer. She would start her research first, test her own hunches, and then, read the paper with a more critical eye.

Dr Wiseman Lovemore beckoned at the waiter to serve them.

"What do you take?" the waiter asked Lilly Loveless.

"A Baobab for me, hot," Dr Wiseman Lovemore said, and started an annotated tour of the various beers for Lilly Loveless but was interrupted with: "A Mimbo-Wanda please, well chilled."

Impressed, he asked her where she knew the beer from.

"Air Mimbo," she said, flipping through the paper to please her host, but avoiding the contents. "Good title," she commented. "What did you write this for?"

"Initially for an 'African Social Problems' conference in Johannesburg, three years ago."

"Three years ago?" Lilly Loveless was dumbfounded.

Why was this guy presenting her a paper three years old, in this day and age when old knowledge is no knowledge?

"Do you have the published version?"

"Published what?" Dr Wiseman Lovemore couldn't believe his ears. "There is no published version," he added with a sudden laugh. "As a matter of fact, the paper was never presented. It has never been presented. I could say there is a history of misfortune to this paper."

"How is that?" she asked, perplexed.

"I never made it to the conference in the end, no visa, no sponsorship, no ... a catalogue of problems," he cleared his throat and took a sip from his beer. He resisted the urge to tell her how discriminatory the administration of the university was. He even did not tell her what he loved telling every visiting scholar he met, how unqualified the Vice Chancellor and Registrar (known more as VC and Reg respectively) were to run the university, as, according to him, they owed their positions more to politics than to scholarship, and were determinedly against research and independence of thought. She will have to find out for herself, eventually, that research was most under-funded here at the University of Mimbo, and that the little money that was made available by the reluctant government in Nyamandem, was used by the VC and the Reg to service their appetites, to build a following amongst sons and daughters of the soil, and also to divide and rule amongst ethnic others. In this way, the little crumbs of funding that came through were more a source of conflict and tension, than of any real service to the university and its mission.

He continued with the story of his paper: "Since then, this same paper has been accepted for presentation at three other conferences, but each time, something happens that stops me from going," he sounded miserable. "The last time, it was the VC – an excruciatingly ordinary-looking vindictive little creature with overbearing breasts the size of Frankenstein pawpaws hanging over the campus like a thunderstorm, as you are going to find out when you meet her – who decried the paper non-scientific, after asking to see a copy. She is a Clinical Psychologist who last read a book or thought a thought when she did her Msc."

Lilly Loveless listened with curiosity and incredulity. She could see that Dr Wiseman Lovemore had no respect for his boss, but still, why would a VC take an administrative decision on a scholarly paper? What are peers for? Shouldn't confrontation of ideas be the golden rule of scholarship? Intoxicating! Mimboland is full of Mimbo-wonders, she told herself, playing on the name of the beer she had fallen effortlessly in love with.

"Two months ago, I came closest to finally presenting the paper somewhere. Right here at Mimbo, at a faculty seminar, thanks to a new dean with new ideas about university life."

"What do you mean?" Lilly Loveless couldn't understand why he should speak in terms of coming closest to presenting his paper in his own university when that is where he should have started. Isn't it one's immediate peers who should tell one how good or bad their scholarly work is? Aren't they those who, satisfied with your performance at the local level, should encourage you to test the scholarly waters further afield?

"I know," Dr Wiseman Lovemore smiled. "That's what one would expect in a normal university."

"Are you saying Mimbo isn't normal? That I have come to the wrong place?"

"I'm not saying more than I am saying, which is simple," he smiled again, took up his glass, tilted it a bit, and looking philosophically into it, went on: "Just when I was about to mount the podium and give the lecture of my life, there was an electricity blackout."

"What!" she exclaimed. "I can see what you mean when you say you haven't been lucky with the paper."

"When power was re-established shortly after, I found myself alone in the Amphitheatre."

Lilly Loveless couldn't believe her ears. She almost thought he was joking, but he looked serious. Either he was good at being serious about joking or at joking about being serious.

"Colleagues and students had all seized the opportunity to escape the burden I was about to impose on them in the form of a lecture, was the nagging feeling I had then."

"You mustn't blame yourself. How can you call your scholarship a burden? What are universities for?"

"It would appear, at least judging from experiences here, they stand for everything but scholarship. Sometimes I feel students and academic staff are in the way of administration, and research in the way of what everyone seems to prioritize."

"That's cynical."

"But well-founded, won't you say?"

"No comment."

"The more I think about it, the more I'm inclined to believe that the problem might perhaps be one of theme."

"What do you mean?"

"A cursed theme, I mean. Perhaps I am, and I suppose you as well are, interested in a theme which people prefer to act out in private while keeping up appearances in public. So don't think I joke when I say there is an aura of misfortune around this paper."

Lilly Loveless felt for him.

"Of course, I'm desperate to be proven wrong," he smiled longingly, "which is why I was quite excited about your coming, when Professor Dustbin mentioned you, and especially after I read your first email," he went on.

The waiter returned with another set of drinks, a Baobab for Dr Wiseman Lovemore, which he preferred hot, and a well-chilled Mimbo-Wanda for Lilly Loveless.

They both filled their glasses and formally toasted welcome and good collaboration.

Dr Wiseman Lovemore felt lighter having unburdened himself, at least temporarily, of the curse of his paper. He made clear what he intended to gain from sharing his paper and ideas: "I would like us to co-author something together in this area," he told her.

She stopped pretending to read, took a sip from her glass, and turned to him, a curious expression on her face.

I am just a beginner, she thought, half flattered, half mystified. Yet here is a whole Dr with many years of university lectureship to his credit

already hoping to publish with me, virtually pleading to be considered, even before he has known what I can or cannot offer. She felt pity.

He was serious. "Publishing in Mimboland is extremely difficult," he proclaimed. "And the only way one can hope to change grades is through seizing opportunities such as this offered by your coming. That is, when one is not a stooge of the party in power." The pressure to publish or perish was printed on his forehead in bold letters. He emptied his glass as if to say, "You have no choice in this matter."

Lilly Loveless conceded without thinking things through. She could see she had little choice in the matter, not only because his request reminded her of ethical dilemmas on which she had been grilled by her committee, but especially because he was going to be her host and guide for the next six months in the field.

He thanked her profusely and said she could do with the paper as she liked, as long as their names appeared on the final version together. He didn't mind being the second author: "Lovemore and Loveless or Loveless and Lovemore, I don't care, so long as I am published. I simply can't afford to perish in a den like this."

That was what she remembered from last evening, at Mountain Valley.

* * *

Dr Wiseman Lovemore arrived soon after Lilly Loveless finished her breakfast. She noted that he wore the same short-sleeved dark blue button up shirt he had worn the day before. They exchanged greetings. He sat down, adjusted the goggles that covered a third of his face, fitted the new SIM card into her phone and loaded it with airtime. Lilly Loveless thanked him, refunded what he had spent, and asked for receipts and his signature for accounting purposes back home. She had brought along a huge receipt booklet which she intended to fill with signatures to satisfy those funding her fieldwork in Mimboland. Transparent accounting entailed that money should be seen to be well spent, which meant obtaining signatures and receipts even from those who could not read and write. Her phone loaded, Lilly Loveless excused herself and sought privacy at the other end of the pool to call her mom.

She didn't want to embarrass Dr Wiseman Lovemore with her mom's silly questions and worries: "What are the people like? ... How much freedom does the weather allow you? ... Any health problems yet? ... Keep your first aid kit handy Always carry with you some ... Have you been robbed? ... Good, thank him for me ... Do be careful - you know what I mean, don't you?"

She tried to reassure her mother, who was more than pleased to hear her daughter's voice defy the challenges of being in Africa.

"My mom sends greetings," she told him, following her call. "She says I should thank you for her, for taking care of me."

Dr Wiseman Lovemore nodded.

"I can relax now that she knows how to reach me," she said, more to herself. "My mom is very nervous about my being out here. She makes me feel like a two-year-old."

"It's understandable. She doesn't want to lose her daughter to the

wild unknown."

"She has all these strange ideas about Africa."

"You can't blame her. Everyone has strange ideas about the unfamiliar." He wanted to add that even Africans had strange ideas about Africa, but thought that would need some explaining, so he didn't.

"I see you'd get along very well with my mom. My plan is to persuade her to come and visit, as soon as I am settled."

"It would be my pleasure to make her feel at home away from home." Dr Wiseman Lovemore liked the sound of the phrase he had just made.

It struck a cord with Lilly Loveless as well, for she smiled her appreciation.

"Your dad, did you speak to him as well?"

"My dad doesn't live with my mom. They are divorced. He lives in the same city, with another woman," Lilly Loveless replied generously.

"Still you should call him to say you arrived safely," Dr Wiseman Lovemore insisted.

"He doesn't worry about me the same way mom does, but we are very fond of each other. I'll call him when I'm settled," Lilly Loveless would not be drawn.

"So what would you like to do today? Whom do you want to see? Where would you want to be taken? I'm at your disposal." He was admiring her curly blonde hair as he spoke, but not wanting to give that impression.

Lilly Loveless was far smarter than he imagined. She noticed his eyes behind the goggles hover over her like butterflies in spring.

"First, I'd like to call Desire, your colleague, to make a new appointment to see the studio she is renting out. I missed our appointment this morning. Then, perhaps we could go to the Archives, and to the university. Later in the day, I'd just want us to sit somewhere so I can take down the names of possible people to meet, interview, and so on. In short, I want all the help you can give, but I wouldn't want to keep you from your work."

"It's my pleasure to show you round," he smiled. "After all, one good turn deserves another. Moreover, if I am to stay in your mom's good books, that's what I must do: take good care of her beloved daughter."

"Thanks. You're most kind. Much appreciated." She touched his arm. "A quick call to your colleague, then we can go."

Lilly Loveless took out her notebook for the number. "Hi Desire... It's Lilly ... Lilly Loveless... I'm sorry I missed our appointment this morning. Could we meet this afternoon? ... Yes, 3pm is fine... He knows your place... OK. I'll ask him to bring me there. ... Thanks... Thank you very much... Bye." Lilly Loveless looked up. "Appointment with Desire at 3pm," she told Dr Wiseman Lovemore. "She says you could bring me where she lives. But you could just describe to me how to get there..."

"No problem at all," he interrupted. "How many times am I going to tell you that?" he appeared to take offence. "I'll take you there, after the Archives."

She dropped her key at the reception and they walked out to where his car was parked.

"I suggest we walk. The Archives are just a stone's throw away."

"Perfect," she smiled. "I love walking."

They arrived at the Puttkamerstown Archives, whose surrounding bushes of wild cassava, cocoyam, creepers and crawlers, rodents and reptiles, elephant grass and other plants immediately appealed to Lilly Loveless. She was introduced to the archivist, a friendly old man, weak with the burden of years, who described himself as "a willing horse" and "a forgotten beast of burden".

Stooped and dented by age, toil and the ingratitude of those who should know better, Prince Anointed was his real name. A pious smile gracing his wrinkled face, he proclaimed with inner pride: "I have worked here since the Muzungu man said farewell to Mimboland."

He gracefully guided them through the collection, the way he did every single visitor.

"The entire weight of keeping the Archives alive rests on my feeble shoulders."

There was a sense of 'these are my babies' in the way he went through the stacks. Proud as he was of the place, and especially of the efforts he had personally put in to preserve the documents, there was a certain sadness and disappointment in his voice. He was not happy with the uncultured practices of the Ministry of Culture. One could see he was pregnant with disdain for ministerial indifference to the need to preserve history and ensure continuity by documenting the present with care.

"The entire government is most impatient with documentary evidence," he told them. "I don't know how familiar you are with Mimboland," he addressed Lilly Loveless, "but every now and again, you hear strange things about the archives of this or that ministry going up in flames," he smiled in bitter cynicism.

"Such mysterious fires always coincide with rumoured embezzlement of public funds. To destroy evidence, they don't mind destroying institutional memory and our public service history. I know of a governor in Zintgraffstown whose first act in office was to clean out the archives for a big bonfire, allegedly because he needed the building so he could receive his mistresses without attracting his wife's attention." His look was grim.

Lilly Loveless who could not tell if he was exaggerating or not, said: "A sort of spontaneous combustion of archives. Suspicious, isn't it?"

Prince Anointed nodded and went on: "All too often, you come across market women and little children selling their goods wrapped in important documents that should be here at the Archives," he shook his silvery head with disappointment.

"Sometimes, I'm so possessed by fury that I find myself begging for coins from passers-by to purchase these documents from the market women and hawking children for the Archives. I hate to see history killed by callous indifference."

He told them, as he would anyone who cared to listen, how he came to work at the Archives.

"In the colonial days, Archives and Antiquity was a very important service. There was this Muzungulander anthropologist who took a look at me and said: 'Young man, I want you to keep records.' He anointed me an instant gardener of official documents, and would refer to me as 'the anointed one,'

when he spoke with his colleagues. He entrusted me to his wife, a very nice lady, who was much, much younger then and who has stayed committed to the Archives to date. She taught me everything I know about classifying documents and keeping history alive."

The couple eventually retired to Muzunguland. Twenty years later, the lady, whose husband had by then passed away, came back to Mimboland for a conference and decided to stop by at the Archives.

"Not only was she surprised to find out I was still there, she wept at the state in which she saw the Archives."

The roof was leaking, and rainwater and humidity had damaged lots of files. She turned to him, an angry look on her face. She needed an explanation.

"Without funds flowing from the government, and with my salary discontinued, there is little even a devoted mother can do..."

She understood. The theme of the conference she had just attended was all about that: The Missing State in Mimboland.

The government did not seem to notice the Archives. Nor did it bother about an archivist enfeebled by age and misery forced to trek kilometres to work five days a week to classify and register documents, repair files, dust, kill bookworms, chase rats and white ants and cockroaches, and attend to researchers without electricity, water or usable toilets.

He told her, "When I retired 10 years ago, there were at least nine employees. Now I am alone. As you can see some files are lying on the floor, some are not classified, most are at the mercy of rats, and every document is at risk because of the humidity and leaking roof. Even if the resources are there, this place needs at least twenty people to work effectively."

He came short of adding that her husband would turn in his grave if he knew the state of his beloved Archives today.

"When the grand lady returned to Muzunguland, she raised funds and sent back the dehumidifier, the photocopier and the computer you see over there," he gestured to machines covered in cobwebs and thick with dust.

"The photocopier has been helpful, but repeated power cuts have crippled it."

Even the dehumidifier was temperamental, probably for the same reason. The lack of an uninterrupted power supply unit to control surges meant that he could hardly use the computer to ease his work. To make matters worse, a diskette got stuck in the computer.

With a wry smile he concludes: "Mimboland is not interested in heritage and the preservation of records. Some concerned university professors have struggled to have me paid to no avail." Then, turning to Lilly Loveless, he teased seriously, "It is thanks to the generosity of researchers like you, that the willing horse continues to assume its burdens."

Lilly Loveless pledged to do her modest best to help Prince Anointed keep body and soul together during her stay. She would also send emails back home to help raise funds for the Archives. She would start with her dad, librarian at the small public library in her hometown and active member of the Muzunguland Public Library Association.

With such music to his ears, Prince Anointed pledged to facilitate her research in whatever way he could, including allowing her, exceptionally, to photocopy outside of the Archives documents of interest to her work.

“Write down your research topic for me, and I’ll start ferreting for you right away,” he told Lilly Loveless.

She did.

Good hearted outsiders always try to help, but our selfishness kills it all, Dr Wiseman Lovemore thought to himself, bitter about a country that had become like white ants to its history.

For over two weeks since her arrival, Lilly Loveless's research has been limited to going to the Archives, visiting Mountain Valley, interviewing the odd person now and again, and chatting with Dr Wiseman Lovemore, whose paper she keeps postponing reading. Nothing yet as systematic and as informed by the experiences of students as she had hoped. That is because of a strike at the University of Mimbo.

She has met, more times than she can recollect, hundreds of students carrying placards, palm fronds and tree branches, chanting the names of the VC and Reg, asking them to stop this and stop that or face the fire of their wrath. She has found the banners particularly rich in messages, ranging from: 'UM: uncertain, unstable, unpredictable' to 'The VC Must Go', through 'Reg son of a Cam-no-go'; 'Down with the Fence'; 'They make the decisions, we live with the consequences'; 'The Logic of Force Has Never Solved the Problem of Hunger'; 'We want no Den of mediocrity'. She has also seen gendarmes and riot police chasing the students with water cannons, tear-gas, guns, batons and a burning desire to discipline and punish. And the students disperse only to reconstitute themselves again with songs of determination screaming in unison: 'Enough is enough - We've been taken for granted for long enough'.

Dr Wiseman Lovemore and her landlady Desire give her regular updates on goings on. The strike has been provoked by the fence under construction. The VC, known as a daughter of the soil because she hails from the local ethnic group, started the construction of the controversial 8km fence round the university. The project, said to cost Mim\$40 million, is heavily criticised by students and staff alike, who think it a mistaken priority.

The staff and students in their majority are categorical: In an institution where there are no lecture halls, no good library, no paper or machines to photocopy, where students are under taught and lecturers underpaid and disillusioned, a fence is hardly a priority project. If the VC was more of the conductor of the orchestra that she is supposed to be rather than seeking to play every single instrument in it as she does, she would certainly know the situation on the ground. Instead, there she is up in the clouds, insulated by ignorance and arrogance and fed with falsehood by spies and sycophants.

Wherever one meets a university lecturer, the complaint is the same: "Here at Puttkamerstown, professors are respected because they are knowledgeable and despised because they are poor". They are said to be unable to afford a drink at bars where even taxi men and truck pushers are able to drink until they are drunk. At the market, their wives stand out because of how much they are ready to haggle until prices are dropped to affordable levels. "Our conditions have gone from bad to worse and from worse to the very worst," they tell everyone who cares to listen.

One of those who criticised the building of the fence in a local newspaper - *The Talking Drum* - is a certain Muzunguland part-time lecturer with the Department of Political Science by the name of Dr Mukala-Satannie. His article entitled, 'A Den of Mediocrity,' so infuriated the VC that she immediately terminated his services of lecturer and barred him from entering

the university campus.

The 'Den of Mediocrity' article is a courageous piece which Lilly Loveless isn't sure she would write, even if she would die to defend Dr Mukala-Satannie's right to express his opinions. "University of Mimbo," he writes, "is fencing itself into a den of mediocrity, while complaining students and staff are miffed by the huge sum of money involved." He calls on the university administration to "tear down this wall," for staff and students "would rather see their scarce resources used to improve deplorable teaching and research facilities, stock the library with books and journals, and build toilets on campus." He writes: "Isn't it true that the fence is just a pretext for the Humpty Dumpty university administration to divert university funds to serve their personal needs and plethora of vested interests?" And concludes: "Some people adore academic excellence, others a den of mediocrity."

Although not implicated in any way, Lilly Loveless has decided it's too risky for her as a fellow Muzungulander to venture into the university in these circumstances. For the time being, she prefers, and has indeed been advised, to do her research from the safety of her rented accommodation in town, Mountain Valley, the Archives and other public places outside the university campus and immediate vicinity. She has also decided to avoid the company of Dr Mukala-Satannie, whom she met briefly at the CNN New Look, a popular bar at the University Junction, where he was surrounded by his student admirers, some university lecturers and journalists, all of whom he was servicing with free drinks and juicy excerpts from his column.

The VC is rumoured to have awarded the contract for the construction of the fence to herself through her brother as the front man. These allegations are doing their rounds in the newspapers, drinking places, restaurants and resting places.

In her defence the VC and her supporters argue that the 8km fence may not seem necessary, considering UM's financial constraints, but the administration have been forced to embark swiftly on this project by "impudent encroachment by squatters" who have erected "hundreds of residential and commercial structures on University land." This Lilly Loveless has read in the official statement the VC was obliged to release. The situation, she argues, could lead to explosions in future if left unresolved. Hence "the firm decision to put off the fire before too late."

To others, Dr Wiseman Lovemore and Desire included, the VC has indulged in the fence because most of the houses and businesses that have mushroomed around the university are owned by people from different and distant ethnic groups perceived to be nothing but opportunists by the local group in whose ethnic territory the university is located. Politically, the VC is said to be particularly hostile to these ethnic others, because they tend to support the opposition parties against the ruling party - PIP, which she serves as member of the central committee and political bureau. She is quoted to have asked "all ethnic strangers" recently to abandon their silly belief in a one-person-one-vote democracy, for the outnumbered sons and daughters of the native soil "expect all strangers to listen and follow us to where we want," especially as the bulk of the strangers "are mere plantation labourers, loafers and criminals."

On this matter of the fence, Lilly Loveless cannot say for sure who was wrong and who was right. Truth in the affair has become like someone

midway up a staircase. Those on the ground floor see him as being up, while those further up perceive him as someone down. The person's basic position remains the same, but cannot be perceived in the same manner by everyone because they do not share the same standpoint.

The strike has grown in intensity. The VC was on radio this morning to explain her position yet again. She urged the public "not to inhale the rhetorical smoke coming out from misguided students and irresponsible, politically motivated lecturers".

Lilly Loveless was lying in bed reading when she heard the news item on the VC. In the broadcast, the VC reaffirmed the university's decision to construct a fence, arguing that it is a priority project and not a "white elephant" as detractors claim. The fence is one of the priority projects of the university, which also includes the construction of the second phase of laboratories, toilets, a football pitch and a monument in honour of President Longstay and his selfless service to excellence in higher education. The construction of the fence is aimed at forestalling the nefariousness of some of the university's neighbours, who have been persistently and consistently altering university land. The fence is meant to tackle the encroachment problem once and for all. This action should forestall the inability of the university to expand in the future, due to the illegal occupation of its land.

On why the university has not planted boundary trees in lieu of a fence, the VC explains that this had been attempted two years ago, "but it proved futile due to the barbarism of animals and humans". Implicitly referring to Dr Mukala-Satannie and his 'Den of Mediocrity' piece in *The Talking Drum*, she says that "no outsider has the right to dictate priorities to my university". As a state-owned institution of higher learning, "we cannot afford to throw parochial and unverified criticisms on the government under which we work, and which pays us all the emoluments we receive." She concluded her broadcast with a call to people to be less sentimental about the university and its deeds. She reassured the staff and students and urged them to have confidence in the university's actions. "In a context of ruthless and unscrupulous politics in our university campus and lecture halls, the administration cannot sit back and watch vandals destroy what has taken the government and the taxpayers of Mimboland much sacrifice to build."

Lilly Loveless is of the impression that no amount of reasoning and explaining suffices to convince ethnic others that the local ethnic elite are not simply using the fence as an excuse to settle political scores. They see the fence as the latest in a series of moves by the local ethnic elite who manage the university against ethnic others. It has been commonplace, they argue, for the VC and Reg to see ethnic other students and staff as working against them and doing everything to make their administration fail, in order to take over the running of the university themselves.

Yesterday she was spectator to a heated exchange Dr Wiseman Lovemore had with a colleague of his who accused him of hatching conspiracy theories to discredit the VC. "I just don't see how you can write a love poem when your house is on fire", Dr Wiseman Lovemore countered. In the course of the shouting match, Dr Wiseman Lovemore insisted that only his conspiracy logic would explain the mobilisation by the VC of "the dreaded Manawa juju of the local ethnic community to intimidate striking students." The colleague described Dr Wiseman Lovemore as a coward who

was using stubbornness to conceal weakness. "I know you are a weak man; I can read that from your eyes," the colleague told him.

Passions are high on this matter of the fence, with protagonists behaving like street fighters in academic robes.

This was the first time Lilly Loveless was hearing of the "Manawa," so when the quarrel was over and his colleague had left fuming, she asked Dr Wiseman Lovemore to tell her more on what actually happened.

"On Tuesday armed troops and the Manawa juju were invited to intimidate students into abandoning their strike. The idea was also to force the students to stop their agitation for the release of five journalism students detained by the police upon instigation by the university administration for propagating 'falsehood.' According to the charge, 'the students were guilty of illegal production of the campus newspaper – *La Voix du Place to Be* – unauthorised broadcast over an opposition radio station of information internal to the University of Mimbo, publication of derogatory articles in radical newspapers intended to incite the general public against the University of Mimbo.'" In his fury Dr Wiseman Lovemore looked like a human shredding machine that would not hesitate to lend itself to the students to make mincemeat of the authorities.

As he speaks on, Lilly Loveless understands why he is so angry. "Some of the students have been arm twisted and threatened into betraying the cause by apologising and asking for leniency before a disciplinary board hastily constituted by the university administration keen to emphasise ulterior motives. In their pleas for leniency, the students claimed they had no intention of tarnishing the image of UM, and that their actions were instigated by politically motivated lecturers who disliked the VC and her ethnic elite at the helm of the institution. One of my colleagues, a close friend, has been falsely accused by these students of having urged them to burn the Reg's official car. And I understand the students are still going to name further instigators. The question is, if these instigators are real, why name them piece-meal? Why ..."

He spoke like someone who sensed danger coming.

"The VC and Reg are vindictive and vicious creatures. Raw, brutal power is their only strength, and woe betides whoever their bile settles on."

Lilly Loveless decided to cool him down with a drink.

"Let me buy you a drink at Mountain Valley," she suggested, tapping him lightly on the shoulder.

He smiled agreeably and followed her, his mind still absorbed by developments at the university. He must compose himself, for in Mimboland, one must never pretend to be dead, else people will bury you alive.

The sound of sirens could be heard in the distance.

"The university?" she asked.

He nodded. "They've invited the gendarmes again, to silence the students with torture."

"Still no agreement then? I wonder why they can't negotiate. Why can't they iron out the wrinkles in their relationship?"

"None trusts the other."

"What a shame."

Mountain Valley was full when they arrived. Dr Wiseman Lovemore recognised a couple of his female students sitting some tables away from the main entrance, but they avoided looking in his direction. To keep them comfortable, he opted for a table at the far end, where he sat with Lilly Loveless, back to the students.

"I spotted two students of mine as we walked in," he told Lilly Loveless.

"Smart move to sit away from them," she stole a look in the direction of the girls. "Do you know those men who they're drinking with?"

"No, but the number plates of the flashy cars over there would suggest they are from Sawang. Customs officers or treasurers, probably."

"Why customs officers and treasurers? What's so special about them?"

"They are the ones with the money, lots of bribes to spend. Their appetites are big and greedy. They are the engine of the national corruption machine for which we are world famous."

Lilly Loveless was familiar with the yearly Transparency International corruption indexes, in which Mimboland was invariably amongst the world's most corrupt countries and most difficult places to do business. Busy-ness was about the only business possible in Mimboland, she had read. From businessmen to politicians through intellectuals, civil servants, the police, military and general public, everyone was busy making money without producing money. Until now, she had thought this assessment was a bit exaggerated by the Muzunguland newspaper that had carried the story.

"When the world calls Mimboland a tropical paradise for parasites, the treasurers and customs officers are those who benefit the most, after President Longstay and his ministers."

Just then, the waitress came up to them and took their orders.

"They are amongst the hottest on campus," Dr Wiseman Lovemore told Lilly Loveless about the girls.

"What do you mean?"

"Going after men, who are known locally as Mbomas."

"What is Mbomas?"

"It is a long story," Dr Wiseman Lovemore began. He told her how many years ago the Mim dollar was radically devalued by 100 per cent, causing lots of hardship among Mimbolanders whose salaries, for the civil servants amongst them, had just been slashed by over 50 per cent. The times were tough, and few could make ends meet. Most men and women lowered their standards and tastes for one another, but even then, men would say to one another: 'Can anyone afford a deuxième bureau these days when things are so hard?' And the answer, of course would be: 'No way, unless of course na njoh bureau.' Deuxième bureau means a woman on the side, and 'njoh' means for free.

Then there were all these rumours.

In Sakersbeach rumour rose and spread to the effect that foreign businessmen from a neighbouring country were using magical powers to

shrink or steal sexual organs of local men, just by shaking hands with them. 'Penis snatching,' they called it. Some of the allegations even made their way to court, despite the reluctance of the latter (modelled on Muzungulander legal systems) to deal with cases of witchcraft where there is often little "concrete evidence" and proof "beyond any reasonable doubt". Curiously there were no parallel rumours about shrinking or disappearing women's genitals. It was said that Mimboland men, in fear that their women would all be food for rich foreign business tycoons, could not ignore such a development. Hence no stone could be left unturned as concerned Mimbolander men sought to put a halt to this. Foreigners had to conform and live peacefully with their impoverished hosts or leave the country. The stories were widely reported and widely believed, and Mimboland men warned not to shake hands with foreign businessmen.

Around the same time, it was rumoured that two girls at the University of Asieyam in Nyamandem had fallen victim to a foreign tycoon with lots of hard currency to spend. The girls were said to have gone out with him for a good time, and to have returned with him to his posh residence in the Beverly Hills area, where he had chosen one of them with whom he retired to bed. But instead of making love to the girl, he had opted for a full meal by swallowing her after transforming himself into a boa constrictor, known locally as Mboma. By the time the other girl found out, her friend had been swallowed right down to her legs, stopping short of her anklets. She stormed out and alerted the police who upon investigating, discovered that it was common practice with this man to make a meal of those he lusted after. The story was widely disseminated by the famished press and also by word of mouth and Radio Trottoir, but generally taken for granted.

"Since then, all sugar daddies or sweat mamas are called Mbomas," Dr Wiseman Lovemore concluded. Then something struck him: "But all of this is in my paper," he added proudly, unsettling dandruff as he scratched his unkempt hair.

"Yes, of course," said Lilly Loveless, as she desperately tried to mask the fact that she had not read his paper yet. "It is all there in your paper, well articulated. I just wanted to hear you tell me about it in person." She fidgeted with her glass, uncomfortable to be lying to a man with eyes magnified by such oversized goggles. How she wished he wouldn't ask to discuss his paper further.

Just then, a journalist well known to Dr Wiseman Lovemore walked in, spotted them, and started coming to their table. "There's a friend of mine, the funniest man in town. He has these outbursts of laughter that are so infectious you can't avoid laughing with him. He is coming to join us."

Lilly Loveless saw a tall, lanky, extra-dark skinned man dressed in a lovely colourful embroidered short-sleeve shirt. He held an unlit cigarette in his left hand and a newspaper under his left armpit. Mid forties or thereabouts was her estimate of his age. She was drawn to his eyes, which stood out so much that the rest of his face, with the exception of his unusually long ears, seemed to fade away.

"Hi, Dr Lovemore," he shouted, holding out his right hand. "When are you going to start loving less?" he asked, jokingly.

Lilly Loveless exploded in laughter, wondering what the guy would say when he found out her name.

"Young lady," he addressed her, shaking her hand. "It is no laughing matter. Tell your friend to love less," he burst out laughing himself, as he took a seat. "The hazards are just too many."

"I'll tell him," said Lilly Loveless, light-heartedly. She could see this guy would be fun.

"Iroko, meet Lilly. Lilly, meet Iroko," Dr Wiseman Lovemore cut in.

"Lilly, sweet name," said Iroko. "But what kind of introduction is that?" he reproached his friend. "Lilly what?"

"I am Lilly Loveless," she laughed.

"No kidding! I like that. You must tame my friend here."

Dr Wiseman Lovemore laughed. "She is not my girlfriend..."

"Who said anything about girlfriend?" Iroko interrupted. "To love less, you need a therapist not a girlfriend." Then turning to Lilly Loveless, he said, "Lilly, by the way, I am Bobinga Iroko, senior journalist with *The Talking Drum*, the one and only newspaper in Puttkamerstown worth writing home about. In most parts of Mimboland, it is not the cock which wakes you up in the morning; it is newspaper vendors screaming '*The Talking Drum, The Talking Drum*'."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," said Lilly Loveless, shaking hands with him again, thinking, I have probably shaken far more hands in my short stay in Mimboland than I have in all my life in Muzunguland.

The waitress returned with the drinks, and went back with Bobinga Iroko's order.

"Now Lilly," Bobinga Iroko began, holding her right hand, "tell me your surname."

"I told you already."

"You mean Loveless?"

She nodded.

"Loveless? ... Your name? ... For sure?"

She nodded again.

"Why would your parents do a beautiful girl like you a disservice of such magnitude by having a name like that?"

"I came too late to influence the naming of my dad," she giggled. "But I do remember asking him why his parents gave him the name. Being a librarian, he looked up the name, traced it in the family to a time when there was so little love in the world that people thought, would this child survive in a loveless world?"

"Amazing coincidence: Loveless meets Lovemore. What does that yield?" He laughed mischievously, before adding: "Don't tell me just yet. I am an investigative journalist."

He took out three bitter kolas from his pocket and offered one to Dr Wiseman Lovemore, who declined, saying: "You know I don't like bitter kola."

"He doesn't like bitter kola," Bobinga Iroko mocked.

"Why?" Lilly Loveless asked, accepting the curious-looking nut herself.

"He's never had any experience in bitterness," replied Bobinga Iroko, jokingly. "His life so far has been a bed of roses."

"Don't. He's certainly getting there." Lilly Loveless interjected without thinking. And when she stopped to think, she couldn't figure out

what made her say it. Fortunately, neither Bobinga Iroko nor Dr Wiseman Lovemore paid her statement much mind or asked her to explain what she meant.

Lilly Loveless took a bite at the kola and winced. The nut tasted like rubber and was bitter as hell. She spat out, and Dr Wiseman Lovemore spoke just in time to avoid a comment by Bobinga Iroko.

"Bobinga Iroko has been my friend for years," said Dr Wiseman Lovemore, addressing Lilly Loveless. "But each time I'm with him, I feel no need for sports, because the laughter he induces is enough exercise. The worst moments I have with him are actually the best in the world. A very jocular fellow he is."

"You've made him blush," said Lilly Loveless, as Bobinga Iroko covered his face with his hands in pretentious shyness.

Bobinga Iroko's drink arrived. "She knows how to have fun at the job, and delivers service with a smile," Bobinga Iroko complimented the bar girl, his thirsting eyes drowning themselves in her good looks.

Lilly Loveless insisted on paying for the beer. "The drinks this evening are all on me," she told them.

"Literally or metaphorically?" asked Bobinga Iroko.

"Literally and metaphorically," replied Lilly Loveless.

"Regardless of whether I literally finish a crate?" Bobinga Iroko teased.

"Regardless of whether you finish two crates," Lilly Loveless challenged.

"So what are you doing in Puttkamerstown?" Bobinga Iroko asked, taking to her sense of humour and suppleness of mind.

"I'm doing research for my doctorate on sex, power and consumption, using Puttkamerstown as my field location."

"You Muzungulanders study funny themes. I've always thought the PhD was a serious degree. Something to confer power, the power to pull others down. I can assure you that no one in this country would sponsor a study like yours, let alone award a degree to someone who works on a theme that trivialises science. Given our development needs, we go for hardcore science, not soft-core gimmick."

Lilly Loveless could not tell whether he was serious or had gone back to his joking mode, so she chose to ignore his comment.

"What exactly do you want to study about sex?" Bobinga Iroko was curious.

"In a nutshell, how it shapes and is shaped by power and consumption," replied Lilly Loveless. "But to get there, I'm interested in everything to do with sex, from love to marriage and divorce, through affairs, cheating, promiscuity, and so on."

Bobinga Iroko laughed mockingly – kikikikikikiki – before saying, "Cheating, philandering and sexual promiscuity are and always have been the tango in town, the tonic to help people bear relationships that would otherwise be too burdensome to even contemplate. Monogamy is incredibly boring, and this is as true of here as it is of where you come from, whether or not polygamous marriages are formally recognised by the state. If you want fidelity, love is not the game for you. Only a moralising hypocrite or an idle social scientist would think of wasting money on a silly study like yours."

Lilly Loveless smiled, instead of being irritated or embarrassed. She couldn't help feeling that Bobinga Iroko was being playfully unpleasant, as his expressive face and eyes displayed warmth that spoke of a man with a good heart, someone who would not go out of his way to hurt a researcher he had barely met.

"Thank goodness DNA paternity tests are not as commonplace as they are dangerous," continued Bobinga Iroko, "else men would be shocked to know how their wives lead them to take perfect strangers for their offspring. Fortunately, social fatherhood is what matters, as the child belongs to he who owns the bed. I don't need a study to know this."

"Lucky you," said Lilly Loveless, still smiling, a bit awkwardly.

"Perhaps you have a point," Bobinga Iroko conceded.

Lilly Loveless sat up, all ears.

"It is not because cheating is the order of the day that people are necessarily honest about it. The natural tendency is to forget the speck in our own eye as we dramatize the speck in the eye of our neighbour. We forget to know that each time we point a finger at someone, three fingers are pointing at us."

Lilly Loveless felt relieved, somehow. It is more than discomfiting to have your research written off by locals with opinions on what good research should be.

"OK, let me contribute to your research all the same, for what it is worth," Bobinga Iroko took her hand, his eyes virtually kissing hers. "We Mimbolanders believe in infidelity, but we also believe in lying to protect our marriages and relationships. Look over there."

She stretched her neck like a giraffe.

"You see that man sitting with that girl, tiny like a broomstick?"

Lilly Loveless spotted the couple.

"The wife died of chronic gonorrhoea, chronic syphilis, and chronic AIDS, consumed by the recklessness of a penis to which she came as a virgin and stayed faithful, while her husband visited everything in a skirt. Mimboland condoms are spectacularly uncomfortable. They spoil the sex, and I can well understand why a man like that was at war against condoms or why Muzungulanders like you prefer to import their own condoms."

Lilly Loveless was speechless. Bobinga Iroko certainly knew how to shock.

He was just beginning.

"See that battered car over there?" he pointed.

"It belongs to someone, a colleague actually, in a way, who has made a habit of living above his means, because he believes in keeping up appearances. He doesn't accept advice."

"What a pity," said Lilly Loveless.

"A pity indeed, for many are the times I have told him that having a second hand Pajero is like getting married to a retired prostitute – more headache than service."

This guy has no inhibitions, whatsoever, Lilly Loveless concluded. He's good.

"And that brand new Prado over there, still without number plates: Johnny-Just-Come," he indicated the car with his troublesome forefinger.

Again, Lilly Loveless nodded, curious for what bombshell he was

about to release.

"50th birthday present for Dr Simba Spineless, the Reg of Mimbo, by the fellow who has won every single contract at the university since he was appointed Reg by presidential decree 20 years ago in place of someone with real ability. It is one of many rewards that come his way for running the institution extraordinarily badly."

Lilly Loveless' eyes dilated with surprised curiosity. "Dr Simba Spineless has been Reg for 20 years?"

"Absolutely," said Bobinga Iroko. "And he was not a nonentity before that. His bread was buttered even before his father, politically very well-placed in colonial times, had met his mother."

"How is that possible?"

"Don't tell me you haven't done sociology, or that you've forgotten the doctrine of your forefather, Charles Darwin," remarked Bobinga Iroko, feigning surprise.

Lilly Loveless smiled, meaningfully.

"He seldom reads nor writes in any scholarly sense," Bobinga Iroko criticised. "When he does, he prefers his manhood to do the thinking and the writing."

This man is incredible, thought Lilly Loveless, but I like him for that.

"And he is unbelievably vain and hopelessly incompetent as he would rather stammer his way to hell than allow talent to shine," Bobinga Iroko continued. "He is a perfect example of what is wrong with Mimboland when it comes to public service: Between word and action, between concept and reality, between desire and gratification stand a wide, deep chasm and a thousand and one obstacles."

"It must be these qualities which the President finds irresistible," Lilly Loveless ventured, then immediately apologised. Although Bobinga Iroko and Dr Wiseman Lovemore were not the company to be cautious about, she knew she must avoid airing her opinions or taking sides on sensitive local issues during her fieldwork.

"With a big fancy car like that and in his position, the Reg doesn't need words to sleep with a woman," Bobinga Iroko laughed cynically.

"How is that?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"The car speaks for itself, so all he needs to say to any woman he wants is: 'enter we go'" Bobinga Iroko explained. "And for a man who stammers the way he does, the car is a real speech enhancer."

"There's no such thing as romantic language with him?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Romantic language is for the poor," Bobinga Iroko mocked, "those who are always suffering from an over-inflation of empty words. Power and money open doors that most can only dream of; they are the poetry of the dumb, the humour of those too busy or too important to flatter, the corrector of those ordinarily too ugly to be noticed. With the rich and powerful, it is all about instant gratification."

"Isn't that too hard?"

"The only thing too hard is their sex drive, which they use as evidence of the opportunities and impunities of wealth and power," said Bobinga Iroko. "Thus the Reg's persistent erections are as rock-hard as they are reckless. They've always been, only more so today with the advent of

Viagra – ‘the secret weapon to empower little warriors of love’, that has made horizontal jogging his favourite sport. He is convinced women worship rock solid hardness and the prospect of all-night staying power that come with the feeling of bigger, wider and fuller that he believes he induces. He has a queue of university girls at his service every day, and is known to be familiar with many more resting places than meet the eye,” he pointed to his eye, as if to say, even for the investigative journalist that he is. “He knows how to keep himself busy enjoying small small things; each time he settles on one, he is consumed by an obsession of covering the face, hammering the base and hoping for the best. He is well reputed to pay girls with university petrol coupons, which the girls are forced to exchange for cash at various filling stations.” Then, as if he didn’t want anyone to overhear him, he whispered, “*The Talking Drum* is building a dossier on him, and we’ve made friends with all filling station attendants to take down the names of all the girls who come with petrol coupons to convert into cash.”

“Why are you doing it?” Lilly Loveless asked.

“Because we are a newspaper with a social responsibility mandate,” he replied. “And because we believe that the petrol coupons are meant for the university to function properly,” he added. “The man’s cell phone, bought and serviced by the university, has more room for the cell phone numbers of girls and female colleagues than it does for the numbers of his male administrative colleagues, deans and lecturers.” He spoke with such conviction that Lilly Loveless was amazed.

“And there’s another reason, which should please you, I believe. We want to render his poor wife a service. The fellow is known to have far more children out of wedlock than he can recollect. We don’t want his legitimate wife and children to suffer...”

“What does his wife do?”

“Her name is Victoria Aa-Shing. She’s also an academic. She used to teach at the university as well. But too many fights pushed the man to engineer her transfer to Nyamandem, under the fake pretext of a promotion to head the directorate of Degree Equivalence at the Ministry of Knowledge Production. Now he is free to go and come from home as he likes, except for the weekends his madam is around, or during public holidays when a former maid of theirs, with whom he has a child as well – the child that pushed his wife to push the maid out of the house several years ago, keeps an eye on him... It is an irony, as she had employed the services of the mannish-looking nanny precisely to stop him from playing hanky-panky with the maid in her absence. But when Dr Simba Spineless is determined to think with his penis, he thinks with his penis. He begs to differ with those who insist there must be more to a woman than being a writing pad,” laughed Bobinga Iroko.

“There is nothing the wife hasn’t done to stop him from noticing and embracing the charms of other women,” he continued. “She has framed and displayed photos of their happiest moments, told him stories about the pleasant past, cooked him his favourite dishes, spiced his meals with popular love charms, and loved him the way she believes no other woman can. But he is what we call ‘woman wrapper’, a man who darts from one woman to another like a nectar-seeking bee. Even then, she would rather give up on life than on her marriage: ‘I cannot back down now, no matter how unwanted he makes me feel,’ she tells her sympathetic academic sisters who in turn scream:

‘Men – terrible creatures!!!’

Bobinga Iroko was certainly the investigative journalist he claimed to be. Or was he more of a rumour monger? Where did he come by his damning details on the private lives of others? Did those eyes and ears of his see and hear beyond the ordinary? These, of course, were questions Lilly Loveless could only ask herself in silence. She however wondered what Bobinga Iroko would say to her mom’s famous cautionary words: ‘the one who gossips to you about others, gossips to others about you.’

“What we hate most about him is the air of impunity he carries around. If only he were a bit modest, even his staunchest critics that some of us are would understand him and soften up,” said Bobinga Iroko.

“So he is a sort of arrogant bastard?” asked Lilly Loveless.

“Much worse, I assure you,” said Bobinga Iroko. “You need to see him. Imagine what he would say in the hearing of his own wife: ‘The mistake men make is to give all their love to one woman. This contradicts even the eating habits of the most poor amongst us. We all eat a variety of foods every week. Why should it be any different with love and loving?’”

“And what does his wife do?”

“What can she do? He threatens her with having the yam and the knife, and she knows just what he means. This is a lion’s den and he is one of the master lions. What I can’t understand is what women find irresistible in this master lion. I’ve always heard what makes a man appealing is good looks, sincerity, honesty, humour, intelligence, passion and tenderness. I’m yet to be convinced he has any of these qualities. And don’t tell me beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.”

“Bobinga Iroko,” Lilly Loveless said, a note of tenderness in her voice, “have many people told you that you have a sharp, impressive and sympathetic mind?”

“A few,” he replied. “But I’ve learnt not to trust what people tell me, until I know what they’re sniffing for.”

“So what am I sniffing for?”

“You tell me.”

“Nothing. Just your sharp, impressive, sympathetic, creative, rebellious mind. With a dish like your mind, I could eat until my tongue complains.”

“You see what I mean? Because you desperately want such a mind, you are determined to find it in the first man you meet in Mimboland.”

“You are not the first man I’ve met in Mimboland.”

“Really? How unfortunate. I was beginning to think of me, myself and I...”

“That proves my point...”

They both laughed knowingly and toasted their glasses. Dr Wiseman Lovemore could see the two were really getting to know each other. From the way they talked, no one would imagine they were only meeting each other for the first time.

“To be fair to the university administration, there’s at least one of them who doesn’t look at girls all the time. That is, if his declarations in public are anything to go by, although *The Talking Drum* is yet to uncover something about him. He is known to make every woman understand he is like bitter kola – not easy to eat...”

"You can say that again," said Lilly Loveless, about bitter kola.

Bobinga Iroko laughed, crushed another bitter kola delightfully, and ate as if it was the best nut in the world. "And this is what women find intriguing," he continued of the exception in the university administration. "Each comes determined to change him, to make a difference, but they all end up disappointed, as he is such a staunch Christian, and has made of the Holy Mother his entire obsession. To be frank though, no one quite knows the extent to which his heavenly Madonna could facilitate his ambitions of challenging the 'Candle Light of the Devil' on the topmost position at the university."

"Wow!" said Lilly Loveless. "You really are all for this guy."

"Not exactly," replied Bobinga Iroko. "He doesn't drink, and for someone from Mimboland not to drink, that is very suspect. It is like being big and not being PIP. Many people are good at hiding poisonous ambition until the time is right, then, like an angry mountain, they explode, devastating life and the creative effort of people for miles and miles without end."

"Is Mount Mimbo volcanic?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, mildly volcanic, but dangerous enough to us who inhabit its sides."

"What is PIP again?"

"Party In Power."

"So everyone who is anyone must be in PIP?"

"What do you think in a country headed by the gifted, the one and only President Longstay?"

Lilly Loveless was tongue-tied.

"PIP means RIP for all else..."

"If you mean whom I think you mean," began Dr Wiseman Lovemore, who had all along watched in amused silence Lilly Loveless and Bobinga Iroko get along. "I've heard a couple of women say he is the way he is because his battery does not charge..."

Just then, Dr Wiseman Lovemore's cell phone rang.

"I must go," said Dr Wiseman Lovemore. "Urgently needed at home. My daughter Pinklie has malaria. My wife has travelled."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Lilly Loveless, emptying her glass and standing up to go with him.

"No, no," Dr Wiseman Lovemore protested. "You stay and enjoy yourself. Bobinga Iroko is a good and trusted friend. You are safe with him."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. We're used to her having malaria. I know exactly what to do when I get home."

He left.

This was the first time since her arrival that Lilly Loveless was hearing anything about Dr Wiseman Lovemore's family. She thought to herself: So he has a daughter, and is married. How interesting! Why has he been so economical with information on his family status? I've told him about my parents, my ex-boyfriend and a lot more. But he's stayed guarded, measuring everything he says like water in the desert. We've been everywhere together, save for his home. Of course, I haven't asked to be taken there. That's a decision for him to make.

"How well do you know my friend, Wiseman?" Bobinga Iroko asked,

as soon as they were alone.

"Not that much. He's a friend of my supervisor's. And he has been very helpful in ensuring that I settle in without much pain. He's arranged for very good and terribly affordable accommodation for me with his colleague Desire, a very friendly woman herself. Desire is such an amazing personality. She's so friendly that she can enter this place and be friends with everyone within minutes..." Lilly Loveless spoke at length on Dr Wiseman Lovemore and Desire, full of superlatives.

"I've known Dr Wiseman Lovemore for years, and we've been friends since our secondary school days. He's very hard-working, but not terribly lucky. It took him years to get his PhD, and it is taking him for ever to change grades. He has been marking time as a lecturer for years. And his scholarly inertia seems to be affecting his social life. His wife, whose highest qualification is a Masters, heads the Department of Rhetoric. She is almost always on a plane to somewhere, to attend one conference or another, and the poor guy is forced to babysit a daughter of whom he seriously doubts he's the father. He is particularly bitter about the fact that his wife talks openly here and there about her infidelities..."

"His wife is unfaithful?"

"It is the talk of the town. She's said to be a favourite hunting ground for many, including our very own local champion the Reg, which isn't surprising, given our penchant for light-skinned women."

"I now understand why he has never taken me to see his family."

"The Reg?"

"No, Dr Wiseman Lovemore."

"He is not a happy man at home."

"Has he thought of moving out?"

"He thinks it is still possible to patch things up, if only she wouldn't go around broadcasting their private life at coffee tables and panel discussions at feminist congresses. There are certain things she just shouldn't talk about outside the home."

"I do empathise with the fact that he is not happy at home, but you can't keep your wife from talking to her friends or expressing herself. That's almost symbolic violence. We survive by discussing our troubles with women friends! And there's no room for inhibition in scholarship." Lilly Loveless felt pleased to reproduce her cherished rhetoric in favour of a sister and expert at rhetoric.

"They hardly talk. She at least should talk with him first. Charity begins at home, doesn't it?"

Lilly Loveless nodded. They at least should talk to each other, try solving their problems themselves, and only after repeated failure at this level should they turn elsewhere for mediation.

"When you visit them as I do," Bobinga Iroko continued, now drinking directly from the bottle, having inadvertently broken his glass. "You notice the huge chasm between them. He seems to live at the back of the house where there's the kitchen and she seems to live at the front of the house. Their daughter is often made to serve like a boundary tree between two warring villages."

"It must be really tough for both of them."

"What would you say to this: A year ago, she left their marital

bedroom, to sleep in the parlour, and sometimes in their daughter's bedroom."

"I think that's completely natural. I know several married couples where he has his room and she has hers. Sometimes they visit each other at night ... My mom and dad lived like that for a couple of years before their divorce."

"No, that doesn't exist here in Africa."

"I admit my knowledge of Africa isn't that great, but I'd be surprised if Africa is that different from Muzunguland," she replied, taking care not to sound as if she wanted to pick a quarrel on the rampant attitude (often informed by assumptions of superiority, she was convinced) of 'Africa is not like your Muzunguland' that she encountered almost every day.

"That's exactly what she would say, has always said. It must be something Muzungulander ... how you are brought up, perhaps," observed Bobinga Iroko.

"What do you mean? Is Dr Wiseman Lovemore's wife a Muzungulander?"

"What did you think? He hasn't told you that his wife is half white, half black? Only half as white as you, but Muzungu all the same?"

"No, he's told me very little about his family situation, like I said." Lilly Loveless was still to come to terms with what she had just heard. Dr Wiseman Lovemore, married to a Muzungu? He didn't come across that way. How interesting...

"When did they marry? How did they meet?"

"That, you'd have to ask him."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be discussing his private life in his absence."

"As I was saying," Bobinga Iroko went on, "if and when she speaks to him, her words are harsh. They burn his heart like vomit from the belly of the mountain."

"Instead of just listening to her words, he should listen to her actions. If she didn't care, would she still be sharing the same house with him? I bet she buys all the groceries and does all the cooking. You talked about words. What soft words does he say with her? What has he done to lure her back some nights? Why should we take those acts for granted?" Lilly Loveless was all too conscious of springing to the defence of a sister without any real knowledge of the facts of the case.

This, Bobinga Iroko picked up on. "You talk as if you've been there and know who does what, and who says or doesn't say what. You may have some wise words, but you don't really know what it's like."

"Maybe so," she conceded. "All I know is that it seems God gives us this funny thing we call love, then he seems to sit back and enjoy watching what we'll do next ..."

"He also gives us investigative journalists to document what we do next, and with whom," he laughed, and screamed for the waiter to replenish the drinks.

They drank and chatted deep into the night. Lilly Loveless learnt a lot.

Bobinga Iroko told her more about Dr Mukala-Satannie, how he came to write his column for *The Talking Drum*, and how he got offered part-time lectureship at the university. Dr Mukala-Satannie was unemployed back

home in Muzunguland. He had completed a PhD on Karl Marx at a time when everyone was saying farewell to Marx. He used to give free public lectures to interested students and the clientele of a pub next to the university that awarded him a degree that could not be listed on the stock exchange.

It was at those lectures that he met a young, beautiful woman who had a soft spot for philosophy. She had just completed a Masters programme on Sustainable Philosophies of Environmental Management, and had been offered a very good job in Mimboland, with the Mimbo Forest Conservation Project, funded and managed entirely by Muzungulanders. The unmarried young woman feared being lonely in Africa.

When Dr Mukala-Satannie heard of her prospective fat expatriate salary, and especially of the fact that her husband could earn an unemployment allowance as well as live prosperously above the infectious misery of Africans, he said to her jokingly: "Why not marry me? If it works, fine, if it doesn't, you could always repatriate me."

She took him seriously. Tall, huge, imposing and instinctively aggressive, he was just what she needed to feel safe in Mimboland, where men were rumoured to have an aggressive desire for unattended women.

She was flattered when he discouraged her from wearing makeup, saying: "There's no need seeking to enhance what is already perfect."

They hastily married, and left for Africa.

Three things he remembered to bring along: The writings of Karl Marx which he hoped to invest in every African he met; Cuban cigars which he had accumulated over the years, stolen off his stepfather's impressive collection of the finest Habana without him noticing; and different whiskies, brandies and wines to keep him going. He once described himself as a man who had reconciled capitalism with communism in his personal life, the only place where such reconciliation was possible, by making his "determined communist mind pregnant with material ambitions". His mastery of Karl Marx struck an instant chord with the provocative and recalcitrant head of Political Science at the University of Mimbo. With an understaffed department and plethoric student numbers, the head of Political Science had little difficulty making a case for Dr Mukala-Satannie to be recruited as a part-time lecturer...

The conversation was no doubt interesting, but Lilly Loveless was dying to go to bed.

"I should be heading home," she told Bobinga Iroko, yawning. "Could you point out where to get a taxi to where I live?"

"I'm not too drunk to drop you off," he replied, standing up, his half finished bottle ignored. "Let's go."

It was difficult to say whether Bobinga Iroko's sobriety was literal or figurative, but Lilly Loveless was trusting enough to entrust herself to him.

"Just a moment," she said and went over to the two students of Dr Wiseman Lovemore, who were still there with the men. She introduced herself as a friend of Dr Lovemore's, and as a researcher, although she stayed deliberately vague on what she was researching. She gave them each her complimentary card, at the same time as she complimented their beautiful hairdo and lovely outfits. Then said she would very much love to meet and discuss with them at their convenience. They exchanged phone numbers. Against the first Lilly Loveless wrote "Fancy", and against the other

"Goodness" – the names the girls gave her.

"I'll call you," she told Fancy and Goodness with a giggle.

"Enjoy the rest of your night," they giggled back, sizing her up. Something about the way they exchanged looks told her what exactly they meant.

She looked at Bobinga Iroko who was watching the starry skies and smiled, broadly.

As Lilly Loveless drove home with Bobinga Iroko, her thoughts were much less of the rest of the night than of the mysterious Mrs Lovemore.

She determined to meet her by hook or by crook.

Lilly Loveless is sitting at the CNN New Look, having a conversation with Britney, the receptionist of Mountain View Hotel, who impressed her the very first day they met. Britney has accepted to serve as her research assistant on weekends, and to conduct interviews on her days off and especially during the strike period, as she would not have that much time once courses resume at the university where she is a student as well. Lilly Loveless has already sensed that to tap Britney and her connections is to tap a wealth of information and experience as a participant observer. They've agreed on an allowance that pleases them both.

Today Britney is presenting the results of her first interviews, for feedback. Lilly Loveless' digital recorder is switched on, and Britney is keen to impress. The money is good and badly needed.

Drinks – a Mimbo-Wanda for the one, a Pamplemousse for the other – and soya are served to them in the back room where they are seated, away from the noisy customers, and the musical cacophony generated by competing bars.

Britney, playing with the tassel of her small beaded purse on the table, begins anxiously: "Here at the University of Mimbo, we use the term 'Mboma,' to refer to a married man who is usually older and with children and who just can't resist what younger university, high or secondary school girls offer."

Lilly Loveless fidgeted with her recorder to be sure it was recording. Satisfied, she sat back and listened, taking down notes from time to time, and scrutinizing Britney to determine if she had made the right choice of research assistant.

Britney started with an opinion: "First and foremost, affairs in our environment are encouraged by money. And we know money is the source of all evil. Money is the machinery behind most cases mentioned of this nature, as you'll see from the interviews I have conducted. Nevertheless, it does not wipe out the fact that there are other aspects attached to affairs."

Lilly Loveless didn't interrupt, but she would have to ask Britney to keep her opinions in check in future interviews. Scholarship is not about subjectivities. Objectivity is paramount, and a good researcher is one who sterilises her personal opinions the way a zombie without a tongue does her words.

"I know a girl, Emma," Britney continued, presenting her first interview. "She is a dark, beautiful girl of average height. She reads Life Sciences and lives not faraway from here, with her junior sister who is also in the university and reads the Bilingual Series. She is going out with a 55 year-old Mboma in town. I shall call him Innocent. Let me add right away that other Mbomas I know are much younger than this man, and given their lucrative jobs as customs inspectors and state treasurers in Sawang, they are certainly much more competitive with girls here in Puttkamerstown than Innocent could ever be on his meagre salary and lousy bribes as an ordinary civil servant. But since he can't simply allow them to beat him hands down, he invests as much of his salary and bribes as he can into these fountains of delight, if you don't mind the expression."

"So it is all about competing for the attention of the girls?" asked Lilly Loveless, taking a sip of her Mimbo-Wanda.

Britney nodded and added, "He wants to prove himself to his competitors and to himself, that he is a force to reckon with, despite his modest means."

"Interesting, very interesting," Lilly Loveless noted in her notebook.

Britney continued: "Innocent's wife of 35 years, a beauty in her days, complains, using the fact of their children's education, five of them, to appeal to his conscience. But he just can't see himself giving up on such exciting encounters with ever more beautiful girls at the university and schools around. That doesn't mean he totally neglects his wife or kids. No, he couldn't do that for the world! He claims all over that he gives them as much as possible the lifestyle they aspire to, which isn't negligible, believe me. His eldest daughter is in high school, and they rent and live in what by every standard should pass for a comfortable house, which is just like the personal retirement house he built in his home village up country during his days as a top civil servant when bribes and salaries used to be hefty and distractions not as plentiful.

"Emma's parents are not poor by any means. Her Mboma, Innocent, met her at a students' party organised at the M&G nightclub, commonly known amongst students as 'Mbomas and Girls.' That was during the second semester of her first year at UM. Innocent, although at the party with his wife, still managed to make an appointment with Emma. Men can be as cunning and subtle as a serpent. Before the party he is said to have practised well-known dance steps used by young boys to attract and impress young babes.

"Even then, Innocent had to go out on several dates with Emma before she yielded to date him regularly. He promised to take good care of her. If the material possessions of Emma are used as an index for Innocent's ability to take good care of a woman, then Emma has no need to complain.

"Innocent gives Emma a lot of money. As noted above, Emma lives with her junior sister and this used to disturb Innocent. So in the fourth semester, Innocent asked her to move to an apartment which he equipped with good sofas and a family size bed. She is from a rich family no doubt, but her parents refused to provide certain things for her on the basis that these were luxuries for a student. These things were however rapidly provided by Innocent. They included a TV set, a compact disc set, a fan, a Moulinex blender, a fridge, and a wool carpet, just to name a few. He also feeds and clothes her. He buys her expensive body lotions, perfumes, shoes, jewellery, clothes and airtime for the cute little cell phone he bought her as a birthday present.

"Health-wise, Innocent takes good care of Emma whenever she is sick. It should be noted that his 'generosity' extends to Emma's junior sister. He settles their hospital bills and pays their transport back home during vacation, among other things here and there, now and again. This keeps Emma's junior sister happy and stops her from reporting her elder sister to their parents, and perhaps from aspiring to be like her sister.

"Innocent takes Emma to social gatherings like parties and also to nightclubs, like Black & White in Sakersbeach, M&G in Puttkamerstown, Biblos in Sawang and even Libidinal in distant Nyamandem. At times he takes her friends and junior sister along with them.

"Socially, Innocent does his best to satisfy Emma but she is always annoyed. She never seems to have enough since he is not usually there when she needs him. As a 'responsible' married man, he has to spend time with his family, but as a lover, she needs him just as much. And he loves the way she makes him feel proud, especially when she says things like: 'You may not be the only man I have known, but you are certainly the only one who has marked me'.

"Word reached Innocent's wife that he was having an affair with Emma. Like a puff adder she stayed cool initially and pleaded with her informant to watch them at close range. It was therefore not surprising when she surprised her husband at Emma's apartment one weekend. Innocent had left the house saying he was going to their home village for an urgent funeral, only for his wife to meet his car parked outside Emma's apartment. She rapped at the door continuously, shouting her husband's name, claiming that their baby son was critically sick. But Innocent didn't answer. She left, and I don't have any details how they resolved matters that day.

"If you permit, I would add here that in other instances where wives have met their husbands in similar situations, they have destroyed their cars and caused quite a scene. There is the story of a university professor whose wife caught him in the act at a resting place, destroyed his car, stormed the door and pulled the girl out of bed and went into a fight with her. She then drove the car home, making her husband bear the shame of taking a taxi home to face her wrath."

Britney watched Lilly Loveless take notes and was impressed. Even with the recorder on, Lilly Loveless wrote frantically as if she distrusted her very own recorder terribly. Britney could see that Lilly Loveless was intimate with her subject matter, reading far more in the account Britney was sharing than Britney who collected the data. It would be great to read that notebook of hers some day, Britney wished. In a beautiful and mysterious way, she imagined the words in the pages of Lilly Loveless' notebook reaching out and touching her, saying: 'welcome to the life of Lilly Loveless, our beloved foster mother'. Britney wondered what would happen if Lilly Loveless were to lose her notebook.

She continued with the story. "Emma was not happy with what Innocent's wife did, and with the fact that Innocent stayed married to his wife despite claiming he loved her more. How could he swear by the moon and the stars in the skies, and by his dead father and the Almighty God how much he loved and would love her till the end of time, yet do little about the fact that he was a married man and she a spinster desperately seeking marriage? So, to get even with him, she dated a student, what we normally call at the university a 'flying-shirt' – no wallet, no power, easily disposable – a man of no consequence. Someone who has little more than words and idle moments to offer the girl he claims he loves. Mbomas hate flying-shirts, and crave every girl to tell them: 'I only open my legs up to older men like you.'"

Lilly Loveless laughed. "How funny," she said. "And they believe it?"

"Men are so easily flattered you can't imagine the sort of things they fall for," Britney replied, and continued with the story. "Amongst girls, it is a common presupposition that every girl who goes out with a married man has a permanent boyfriend, as every girl is interested in a more meaningful

relationship than most married men can offer, however much they claim they love you. But girls also know that you can't just leave a Mboma like that. You have to do it with tact, else you are in trouble. Mbomas are known to curse, crash and crush without mercy, when betrayed."

"To avoid all the tensions, anger, beatings, claims for gifts to be returned, and the odd passion killing now and again?"

"Absolutely," agreed Britney.

"Sometimes a relationship is not true until it has been tested by betrayal," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes," said Britney. "In this case however, everything went on smoothly, as Emma successfully juggled Innocent and her student friend, until she met and fell for a young 'bushfaller' with lovely dreadlocks who introduced himself as 'a professional footballer in Muzunguland who was back home to chill out after a hectic season'. Bushfallers are guys who have been abroad and accumulated enough money and material possessions to make their weight felt back home, especially with young singletons. Topping the bushfaller league are footballers, who are generally the well-paid."

"Sorry to interrupt, but could you tell me more about bushfallers?" Lilly Loveless was hungry for more.

"What else?" asked Britney, "apart from the fact that more and more Mimbolanders feel that salvation is possible these days only through going to Muzunguland or elsewhere in the world associated with milk and honey, where most of them slave away in very difficult and often subhuman conditions, but which isn't deterrent enough for those with ambitions of bushfalling? Bushfalling has become so common that someone can be here with you, and a minute later you hear he or she has fallen bush."

"Why do they call it bushfalling?"

"It is a metaphor for hunting, I think. Those who go to Muzunguland are like hunters who go into the bush to hunt for game. And just like the hunter returns to the village at the end of the hunt, the bushfaller is expected to return to Mimboland to show family and friends what in terms of money and material possessions they have gained. Those who don't return and who don't repatriate money and possessions are not well regarded, just as those who return empty-handed. A hunter is a good hunter when there is a catch. Similarly, only bushfallers with something to show back home shall be recognised and celebrated. A hunter is also expected to be generous with their catch, hence the common saying here in Mimboland which goes thus: 'Bushfaller weh ye no di leak like kenja fowl by the time ye go back for whitemankontri, mean say dat bushfaller na Japanese handbrake.'"

"Which means?"

"A bushfaller who is not leaking like water in the perforated basket in which fowls are carried locally by the time he returns to Muzunguland, means that he is far from being generous."

"Wow, that's great," said Lilly Loveless, "an invitation for bushfallers to make their success collective, eh? What are local attitudes towards bushfallers who don't make it or who disappear for good?"

"I don't know if you'd understand, but I want to quote my auntie who has a very negative attitude towards Muzunguland, especially in the way it transforms those who embrace it through bushfalling. She says: 'Whiteman Kontri di over spoil pikin dem. Na some dorti place. Man di die

20 year, mama die, papa die, pikin no come. Na which kana place be dat? Pikin di comot for Whiteman Kontri come for try for sell hi papa hi house for here. Na which kana fall bush be dat? Better make ma pikin fall bush for backside house..."

Britney attempted a translation for Lilly Loveless who took down notes. Satisfied, Lilly Loveless told Britney she could continue with her story.

"This bushfaller brought foreign currency, a nice car, and promised to take Emma to the altar. A dream come true – walking down the aisle with a man of your age or thereabouts. She was so excited that she defied all odds to date the bushfaller. Not long afterwards, Innocent learned of the relationship from none other than Emma and was very bitter."

"Emma herself told him about the relationship with the bushfaller?" Lilly Loveless was surprised.

"Yes, she did," replied Britney.

"That was courageous of her, a sign that she had fallen deeply in love, I suppose."

"No, it was a sign of confusion, I think," Britney corrected. "She always had this dream of marrying someone her age in a formal church ceremony. And as if to increase her chances of fulfilling her dream, she had served as bridesmaid at so many weddings that some of her friends had nicknamed her 'the professional bridesmaid'. It was only reluctantly that she went out with Innocent, so you can imagine her disappointment when he still would not divorce his wife to marry her."

"Already several times before, she had challenged him to do something about his marriage, with words like these: 'Of course your marriage is a problem for me, even though you say that your feelings for me are not second to another love. The fact remains that I am forced to share you with at least one other woman, who occupies a very special and privileged position in your life. Is that not something to feel sad and jealous about? I try to refrain from knowing more about her than absolutely necessary, as I know that if I start to try to imagine who your wife is and what your relationship with her entails, I will be overcome by an obsessive hunger to know every detail, feeling myself in competition with her, forcing you to prove again and again that you care for me – a fact that is not all that self-evident considering the fact that you spend almost every night with her and not with me. The less I know about your wife, the easier it is for me to ignore her presence, to see her as a kind of institution, but not so much as a person who is in my way. And though you don't like the word 'mistress', I am well aware that my position would always be precisely that: secret meetings, stolen time, anonymous rooms in resting places, no integration in every day life because of the clandestine status of our relationship, constant jealousy on my part, constant on your part that I might be swept off my feet by some suitor who didn't need to hide me away...'"

"So what did she tell him when the bushfaller came along?"

"She wrote him a note, a copy of which she showed me: 'Dear Innocent,' she wrote, 'I know you love and care for me, which makes me want to say something that I would not be able to stand by when the time comes and consequently I become so confused. I just can't be a second wife or keep going out with you as if your wife was not there. The fact is that I love and respect you so much and therefore believe that you deserve the very best in

life. You deserve to be happy, successful and prosperous and nothing should come between you and all these things not even me. However, I have my own plans and dreams which I selfishly cling onto. Like you rightly said, and I admit I want a future in which someone will stand and wait for me at the end of the aisle. But this is not going to be just anybody like you think. I will be looking for something in particular in that person and that something will be all you are as a person. The question I imagine you will ask is, why I have refused to take you yet look for somebody like you. All I will say is that, I am not strong enough to live above what society thinks and that will not make you as happy as you deserve to be.' That's the note she sent Innocent."

"So Innocent must have learnt of the bushfaller from elsewhere and only indirectly from Emma," Lilly Loveless pointed out.

"What is important is the fact that Innocent came to know of the bushfaller," said Britney.

"How did he take it, when he found out?"

"He couldn't believe he had spent and sacrificed so much only to be treated so shabbily. Emma didn't give a damn despite all Innocent's threats to empty her apartment. At the same time, Innocent was so much in love that he couldn't bear to lose Emma, as he told his best friend and keeper of his secrets. But if you would permit me, I think the right word is infatuation, considering how he was repeatedly humiliated by Emma in front of the bushfaller, yet he couldn't do without her. Jilted though Innocent was for three months, right now he is hand in glove with Emma. The bushfaller was a fly by night lover, saying all the right things a girl wants to hear and making her dream what was never to be. He dribbled her the way he did the ball in a football game.

"Still, Emma found it hard to stop believing, in her heart of hearts, that the bushfaller had meant all the honeyed words he had directed her way. But the reality was that his words, meaningful though they sounded, were as empty as words not said. So she turned back to her Innocent, reluctantly but surely, to ask for forgiveness. She told him: 'Forget about the difficulties and trials we have been through and be as happy as ever. God's blessings and graces will stay with you through my humble prayer. Remember, I love you and you are the one and only true owner of my body. Moments and time spent with you are very precious and my brief escapade only permitted me to view those moments with happiness and assurance. I know that with you I will always eat the fattest of the bones.'"

"It's amazing, this thing called love," said Lilly Loveless.

"Emma continues to hope that one day Innocent will divorce his wife and marry her, or at least not leave her for greener pastures. She lives her life with her hand in her mouth. A situation not helped by his mixed messages. Recently when a friend of hers told him: 'Innocent, I love that Emma very much, her eyes, her legs. She is so beautiful', he replied: 'Would you like me to take her as my second wife?' To which she said in reply: 'Yes! First even.' Then she proceeded to say she was very pleased when she first heard that he was going out with Emma. When Innocent met Emma later he said: 'I've never been this encouraged by someone this close to you.' So what stops him from acting on his divorce then?

"Emma dreams a lot, and Innocent is often in her dreams. She shared with me a dream she had recently. She dreamt Innocent was travelling to

Muzunguland for a public service meeting. The day he was supposed to leave for Sawang International Airport, she heard Innocent was hurrying up everyone in the house and his wife and children were so angry and said: 'Everybody knows he is hurrying to go and spend time with his girlfriend Emma, but he should at least be a bit calm and stop rushing people'. Innocent's wife was very very angry. In the dream, Emma had a dream that same night she learnt of what happened, a dream she narrated to Innocent thus: 'I dreamt that we were at the airport and we were going to Muzunguland together, and we were so into each other and all of a sudden your wife came shouting my name and saying horrible things, telling the whole airport that I was stealing her husband. I was so frightened, I hid behind you as she was approaching where we stood, you told her to be calm but she insisted on attacking me, and you started fighting. I started crying and my mother appeared and picked a quarrel with your wife. I was seriously crying. I told my mother that you had divorced your wife and wanted us to live together and she said we were doing the wrong thing because your children will always want their mother. I was shouting that they would love me and that I was quite fond of your daughter in high school, but no one except you was listening to me and just when your wife was about to hit me, I woke up. Funny, isn't it?'"

"It's clear she is obsessed with Innocent divorcing his wife, but even more obsessed with having a man of her own who has not been married before," said Lilly Loveless.

"Good interpretation," said Britney. "I do wish her the best."

"With Innocent?"

"With whoever. A woman plans and God disposes through man."

"Well put, could I quote that?"

"You can quote anything," said Britney. "Something I forgot to say about Innocent is that, at the same time as he is pursuing Emma and university girls, and boasting how well he provides for his family, it surfaces that he is not paying his rent regularly for the lovely house he inhabits with his family. One day his wife was scandalised to read a mocking and threatening note from his landlady about non-payment of his rent: 'I have observed with dismay your unwillingness to pay your rent and the reluctance in settling your bills. I have explained to you about the inconveniences you cause me when you delay your rent. It would seem the explanation only gave you more grounds to delay the payments of your rent. I want to remind you that we agreed from the very beginning that your rent is to be paid at the beginning of the month. You have not only taken it upon yourself to pay at your convenience but you don't have the courtesy to inform me of any difficulties you have. You wait until I ask you then you tell me fabulous stories. It's amazing how you feel that you are the only person who needs to live. You had no tangible reason for paying your October rent in December and telling me you'll pay November's rent at your convenience. Let me use this opportunity to tell you that your cynical remarks about my exaggerated riches and your having a house of similar stature in your native village are certainly the reason for you delaying your payment. If I'm rich then my riches are genuine. I've not got to inconvenience anybody to be rich. So what's your problem? If I have millions enough to buy 4 cars, what's your problem? Considering that I've always had difficulties collecting your rent and given

the general reluctance with which you want to settle your financial obligations, i.e. rents, bills and debts, I want to let you know that I have had enough of it and I'm asking you to quit my house by the end of the month. You can go and live in your home village.' His is a world of make believe," Britney concluded.

* * *

To further satisfy Lilly Loveless' curiosity, Britney shared with her the story of Spiteless, a girl who keeps hoping to meet a bushfaller, and whom bushfallers repeatedly deceive because her quest is so desperately engraved on her forehead. "One of her catches was a bushfaller who, from every indication, had a fiancée with whom he had fathered a child already."

"Why do you say that?"

"This girl accompanied another girl to welcome back her own fiancé from Muzunguland. The man, Virtue, was carrying two gifts from Maradona, as the bushfaller in question was known in his circles."

Lilly Loveless noted the coincidence between bushfaller and footballer in the two stories.

"One of the gifts was for Spiteless and the other for Maradona's fiancée, who wasn't present and who didn't know a thing about Spiteless. Thrilled with the gift and the welcome party for Virtue, Spiteless sent Maradona an email the next day. 'There was great feasting and happiness. I tell you that I just felt jealous! What for? When on earth shall I ever have the chance to go and welcome my own man? I thought silently.' Most definitely encouraged by Maradona, Spiteless sent email after email. In one, a long letter, which she brought me to correct because her English isn't very good, she wrote about how 'Our distance seems to create a problem', but how 'I am very happy and encouraged by the many emails and phone calls you have afforded to make.' As things intensified, from Spiteless' vantage point at least, Virtue, a Born Again Christian, could not stand it."

"He told Spiteless the truth?"

"Yes, and much more. When Maradona wrote to him with money to parcel out to his fiancée and to Spiteless, Virtue became spiteful. He wrote to Maradona. 'I wish to make it clear to you that I do not wish to pry into your love affairs. Spiteless' problems are not mine, but the point which I want to drive home is that I should be left out in any Maradona - Virtue - Spiteless relationship. Please, Maradona, I shall henceforth welcome none of your girlfriends except your fiancée or wife. Such uneasy relationships are not my ways.' He was particularly unhappy that Maradona had engineered Spiteless, and not his fiancée to be close to his wife. 'I think it would have been more agreeable if you introduced your fiancée to my wife instead of Spiteless. I do not mean that Spiteless is unacceptable in any way. She is quite a superb and amiable girl. I do not like the platform on which I came to know her. I feel rather very ashamed to meet her now following what I know.'"

"What did Maradona have to say for himself?"

"He wrote back with copies of all the letters Spiteless had sent him, asking Virtue to see for himself that Spiteless was reading far more into the relationship than there really was. But Virtue declined. He wrote, 'I think it is not proper for me to read her letters to you and so I have personally returned them to her. Maradona, you are a good brother and a valuable friend, but you

have to understand that my relationship with anybody has to be founded on mutual respect. Your action does not seem to conform to this golden rule of mine. I hope and pray such an act should not again occur.”

“Were they actually brothers?”

“No, not even brothers in Christ, as you can guess.”

“How did Spiteless come out of all this?”

“She was full of spite towards Maradona, when she found out about his fiancée and untruths. ‘I am so angry over your selfish and inconsiderate behaviour that I cannot trust myself to speak to you without losing my temper. When you grill fish, please use aluminium foil to prevent the oil from dirtying the grill pan. If you cannot do so, kindly restrict yourself to one grill. It is not very pleasant to find both grill pans smelling of stale fish oil when one wants to toast bread and to get one’s bread stained yellow.’ She was and remains at her metaphorical best when angry, but her quest for a marriable bushfaller continues.

* * *

The surging cacophony of music penetrated the silence of their back room, like a river that had overflowed its banks.

“This is unbearable,” Lilly Loveless complained, gathering her things. “Do you think we could move somewhere else?”

Britney took a quick look at her watch. It was 10:30am. “Let’s try Mountain Valley,” she suggested. “At this time of day, it should be quiet for us to work.”

Lilly Loveless paid for the drinks.

After a fifteen minute taxi ride, they arrived at Mountain Valley and spread their things out on one of the many empty tables.

A waitress came and insisted they buy drinks, to be allowed to sit and work.

“We patron no like make people dem just come sit no drink, no chop,” she told them, making it clear that she was simply implementing instructions.

“I am a regular customer here, don’t you know me?” Lilly Loveless protested playfully. Then to Britney she asked: “Same thing?”

“Same thing,” Britney replied.

“One Pamplmouse, one Mimbo-Wanda, both cold,” she ordered.

The waitress left and was soon back with the drinks, accompanied by a tiny bowl of roasted groundnuts.

* * *

Britney resumed. Her second interview was about Pius Toktok, “a man who had worked for several years as a journalist with Radio Mimboland International in Nyamandem. During this time he had gained the interest of the local population because of his mastery of the language and style of broadcasting. Then he decided to leave for Puttkamerstown, in quest of a Masters degree at UM to be able to gain a promotion at his job. This meant he had to be away from his family in Nyamandem for the best part of two years. It also meant, given his popularity as a seasoned broadcast journalist, that he would be easily recognizable and admired, especially amongst us girls.

“Pius Toktok was almost past middle age. Soon after his arrival at the

university, he fell for a student of History, Beatrice. She was an aspiring journalist herself, spoke with affectation, and had a soft spot for language well articulated. Whether or not this would have been enough for a relationship, I don't know. But what I know is that the relationship started when Pius Toktok showed signs of being financially upright and thus Beatrice didn't hesitate to open when he knocked at the door of her heart with affection. Like most Mboma relationships, this one was not really open. It was discreet. Only the neighbours around Beatrice had an idea of this affair, as Pius Toktok would drive late in the night into the mini-cité where she lived. More often than not he made sure he left her room before the light that announces the break of day. Unfortunately for Pius Toktok, the news of his infidelity soon reached his wife in Nyamandem."

"Nothing can hide forever under the searchlight of the tropical Sun, as Bobinga Iroko would say," said Lilly Loveless.

"Absolutely," agreed Britney. "Upon hearing the unpleasant news, Mrs Toktok, herself a beauty still in her twenties, made a surprise visit. She made sure she had a good description of Beatrice before leaving Nyamandem. When she got to the mini-cité where Beatrice lived, late that night, she went to her room and knocked at the door. Pius Toktok and Beatrice were at home and, of course, in bed. With the small piece of cloth that he wrapped round his waist, Pius Toktok made straight for the door unsuspecting. To his greatest surprise, he beheld his wounded wife who roared into the room and seized Beatrice by the throat. A big fight broke out amongst the three. Guilt rendered Pius Toktok speechless before his wife. The shouting and wailing drew the attention of the neighbours who rushed out of their rooms to rescue the situation. It took them time and persistence to stop the fight and separate the women. There had been slapping, biting and tearing of clothes – so much so that the two ladies were half naked. Soon afterwards, there was a serious exchange of unpleasant words. Pius Toktok's wife did her best to crush her husband with words in the face of the crowd. Same treatment for Beatrice who felt really bad as the crowd was full of her university mates, who could not understand what Pius Toktok had seen in her modest looks to risk his marriage. It was an experience that marred her entire stay at the university, as each time she was seen around campus, fellow students would shout 'husband snatcher international', pointing insultingly in her direction. Many were surprised by the strength of character she displayed by not abandoning her studies after what happened rapidly became a life in hell for her. The relationship with Pius Toktok didn't outlive the incident. Whatever has happened between Pius Toktok and his wounded wife, I have not succeeded in finding out, but it doesn't seem he completed his studies at UM."

* * *

Lilly Loveless was pleased with the way Britney had conducted the interviews so far. They would provide some insights, she was sure. But she would have to tell her to be meatier in the data she collects, and to watch her personal views, in future interviews. It was better to have fewer and richer interviews, than many sketchy encounters. She thanked Britney, paid for the drinks and they separated, with Britney going off to conduct more interviews.

Lilly Loveless on the other hand went to the Archives where Prince

Anointed was waiting for her with files to photocopy. She collected the files – mostly newspaper reports on sexual scandals and rumoured affairs in official circles in colonial times and the immediate post-independence period. She gave him Mim\$200,000 to help him out for the month, and was about to leave when a visibly touched Prince Anointed, tears in his eyes, held her hand and said:

“An angel has made an appearance in hell.” He rubbed and caressed her hand with gratitude, graciousness, integrity and dignity. “I can’t begin to thank you enough for this,” he was now holding the money in both hands. “I haven’t seen anything like this for God knows how long.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Lilly Loveless didn’t want him to make too much of the gesture. “Whatever one can do to help out now and again to keep hope alive one will do.”

“What do I give you in return? Thank you is hardly enough...”

“You’ve already done enough for me”, Lilly Loveless looked at the files she was carrying appreciatively.

“Wait a minute.” Prince Anointed searched his trouser pockets. “I found this in my personal archives at home,” he said, handing her a piece of paper.

“What is it?” she asked, opening the folded paper. She could see the age on the paper.

“It’s something I wrote about money, when I was still a boy,” he told her. “I didn’t know I still had it. In fact, I had completely forgotten I ever wrote something like that.”

“As a boy? Amazing!”

“That’s the power of preserving documents.”

“You are absolutely right. I hope there were many more like you.”

“You can take the piece along. Photocopy it, so at least you have something by me, not simply something preserved by me.”

“I certainly will.” Lilly Loveless thanked him for the gift and left, touched.

Her curiosity couldn’t wait. As soon as she was out of the Archives, she read the piece:

‘Money, You’re impossible.

‘I’m always counting it and saving and wanting more of it, but it never seems to satisfy my needs. Every time I get it, it isn’t enough. I want more! More! More! Every time I do get it I don’t know what to do with it. Mom says save it for something you really want. Dad says save it for school. But I say, spend it. Now! Then just when I’ve decided what to buy I find something better. Money! You’re Impossible.

‘The little paper monster that everyone wants, that everyone likes, that everyone treasures. It crawls in people’s ears and up to their brains and then it does its disastrous work. It fills people with awful feelings of greed, disgust and jealousy. And then it leaves without fulfilling so many needs. Money! You’re Impossible.’

How apt! And a relevant gift too! Lilly Loveless went back into the Archives to thank Prince Anointed once more, and to invite him for a drink at a place of his choice after work.

The next day Bobinga Iroko appeared abruptly, and insisted Lilly Loveless should come along with him to Sakersbeach, where he had an appointment to interview a heavyweight politician for *The Talking Drum*. He promised to show her the lovely beach if she came. "Lots of opportunity to sunbathe," he added, which was enough to persuade her. To Lilly Loveless, the beach was the most romantic place in the world. She couldn't wait to kick off her shoes and bury her feet in the warm sand of the beach that she had heard so much about. There was another reason though. He would miss his appointment if he sat down to tell Lilly Loveless of developments. Better to do so in the car, on the way to Sakersbeach, was his idea.

Lilly Loveless quickly assembled a towel, sun protection cream, her digital recorder and camera, her iPod, and other things she thought she would need in Sakersbeach.

"I haven't seen or heard from Dr Wiseman Lovemore for days. Is he OK?" she inquired, getting into the passenger seat of Bobinga Iroko's second-hand double-cabin Toyota Hilux pickup. She noticed he was wearing a similar flowery well-embroidered shirt to the one he wore when they met the first time at Mountain Valley, which she told him she liked. If her mom was here, she would have jumped to conclusions, for she was used to saying in response to her childhood question on what love was: 'Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day.'

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," said Bobinga Iroko, turning the ignition.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Lovemore is under detention..."

"What for?"

Bobinga Iroko told her the story. The night a week ago when Lovemore left abruptly following a phone call, was when he was picked up by the police. "The maid made the call under duress, forced to lie that Lovemore's daughter, Pinklie, had suffered a critical malaria attack that needed urgent attention." When Dr Wiseman Lovemore hurried home, two policemen greeted him with handcuffs. They took him to the police station where he was detained, charged with instigating rebellious students to vandalise the Reg's car, and also for being one of the masterminds behind student unrest at UM. The police played back a recording of him making injurious statements against the VC and Reg in an argument he had with a colleague, Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh, about the strike.

"When I went to see him upon learning of the detention, his spirits were not too low. 'Being incarcerated and in pain proves I'm useful,' he told me. But he was very disappointed that Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh, a colleague of his at the university with whom he quarrelled recently had secretly recorded their exchange and handed the tape to the university administration for whom he was spying. The police are now hanging onto every critical word he uttered in the tape as evidence that Lovemore is guilty."

Lilly Loveless remembered the passionate exchange between Dr

Wiseman Lovemore and one of his colleagues. She was sure that was the Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh in question, for the man had left in fury and in a hurry. But how could a colleague, an intellectual and an academic do a thing like that? She was baffled.

"What could he have said that was so injurious?" she asked.

"The details are scant, but he is said to have gone beyond the limits of acceptable criticism. Dr Wiseman Lovemore is not one to be suffering from too much respect for his boss. So you can well imagine what he must have said."

"We need to get him released. Have you tried finding out how to go about this?"

"The police don't want to hear the word 'bail' mentioned in connection with Dr Wiseman Lovemore. They've been instructed to treat him as a dangerous element to be watched closely."

"Do you think he is guilty? Did he instigate students to burn down the Reg's car? What truth is there to the allegations?" Lilly Loveless was full of questions. She felt guilty that it was only now she was learning of Dr Wiseman Lovemore's detention. Why didn't Desire tell her? Then she remembered that Desire wasn't around, that she had said something about taking advantage of the strike to rush to her home village upcountry to attend to some urgent matters.

"There's something fishy about the arrest. I know that the VC and Reg are above Senate in their prerogative to bite and blow with impunity, but what I can't understand is why his fellow critical colleagues at the university are being so silent. Am I to believe that we are living in the company of cowards who only pretend to stand up for things? One thing I can assure you though, *The Talking Drum* is leaving no stone unturned to get to the bottom of the matter, especially in the light of certain things we have uncovered..."

"What have you uncovered?" Lilly Loveless was curious, as always, whenever she was in the company of this indomitable Bobinga Iroko who seems a step ahead of everyone.

He recounted how the same night that Dr Wiseman Lovemore was arrested, at exactly midnight, the VC and the Reg, each dressed only in underpants, had driven to the University Junction, parked their cars and headed for the main gate of the university. With them were two men dressed to look like elephants, carrying two dark clay pots, two shovels and two machetes, and pulling along two dogs, two goats and two cocks. When they arrived at the main gate, the goats, the dogs and the cocks were slaughtered over the VC and the Reg who were lying across the gate as instructed by the elephant men. Some of the blood was collected in a clay pot, mixed with herbs contained in the other, and given to the VC and the Reg to drink and to say their wishes as they drank. "We want the cam-no-gos to leave us alone. We want them to leave our land," they screamed in unison. The elephant men quoted a proverb which warns the calabash never to have anything to do with a stone, for any contact between the two is likely to hurt the calabash only.

The VC and the Reg each angrily voiced instances when they had suffered the fate of the calabash, and beat their chests triumphantly for instances when they had been the stone. A common bitter disappointment to both of them was the recent rejection of their applications for promotion to

associate professorship, by the National Universities Promotions Council chaired by a cam-no-go who had the audacity to record in the minutes: "These two applicants do not qualify to be even the senior lecturers that they currently are. Neither has published a scientific paper in the past ten years, nor has taught a course. For twenty years, their intellects have proved most underequipped for any serious scientific exploit. To promote them therefore, would be a further disservice to an institution that is already choking from their ill-advised appointment to its helm." For this reason the VC, a Clinical Psychologist with an Msc to show for it, had missed becoming associate professor, and had sworn to make mince meat of all cam-no-go who dared to cross her path. She had felt so embittered that she would have done something rash and desperate, had her sister not taken her to discover a women only club in nearby Sawang – run by a certain Helena Paradise, 'the ultimate in women's liberation' – specialising in turning stress into pleasure, where she was told: 'after this, you'll never want a man again'. As for Simba Spineless the Reg, a PhD in Geography and Volcanology had threatened to erupt in war "against the ingrates that suck our native soil dry with greed like leeches."

After incantation upon incantation, the elephant men then proceeded to dig a big grave in which the slaughtered goats, dogs and cocks were buried alongside an exercise book and a ball point pen.

According to Bobinga Iroko, the students who witnessed this ritual were at the offices of *The Talking Drum* first thing in the morning. They narrated what they had seen and heard, and were ready to sign the story themselves as proof of its authenticity.

The elephant men reassured the VC and the Reg that what they had buried "will numb every student and member of staff who thinks evil of you." Before leaving the scene, the elephant men promised to intensify their magical powers to ensure that "our daughter and our son, and all those who mean them well, are protected by our native soil from all cam-no-gos."

"What are cam-no-gos?" Lilly Loveless asked.

"These are a skin rash that itches like mad," Bobinga Iroko laughed. "You scratch and scratch and scratch, but the itches go nowhere."

"So the VC and Reg have been attacked by this skin rash?" Lilly Loveless was baffled.

"Yes, and it disturbs them like hell," he continued to laugh.

"Really?" Now Lilly Loveless knew that Bobinga Iroko was in his joking mode.

"Yes, and embarrassing too. At parties and official functions the cam-no-gos do not allow the VC and Reg to do their jobs. They attack, and the VC and Reg would scratch and scratch to no avail. They can't even take their fingers from their skins to take a drink or something to eat. It is terrible, because the cam-no-gos make them feel like going naked, and grating themselves against a rough surface till they find satisfaction."

Lilly Loveless finally understood the metaphor. "So people have borrowed from this skin rash to refer to others they don't like?" she asked.

"That's right. Cam-no-gos are people whom the sons and daughters of the native soil consider a pain in the arse."

"You mean ethnic-others?"

"Yes, ethnic-, regional-, and whatever others... Anyone not perceived

to belong really."

"Isn't that rather parochial and dangerous?"

"That is the way those who run this country have fought to ensure that we remain forever divided. They're out to mar, not to make."

"It's like racing where angels fear to tread."

"Exactly, this is why we say, Mimboland na Mimboland."

Bobinga Iroko told Lilly Loveless that the story was front page news in *The Talking Drum*. Unfortunately, there were no photos to clinch the case.

"It would have been great," he said, "to capture the VC and Reg lying naked across the main entrance of the university, dripping with ritual blood!"

This guy loves sensation, Lilly Loveless thought.

"If they feel so strongly about their land, can they be that wrong? There must be something to the fact that the VC and Reg would go to these lengths," she challenged.

Bobinga Iroko smiled, superiorly, and said: "You don't know the extent to which some would go just to hate. It is always in someone's interest to promote enemies, real or imagined."

Lilly Loveless didn't know what to say in response, and she couldn't understand why the VC and Reg should hate the very staff and students that made the university and their jobs as administrators possible. "Mimboland na Mimboland", was all she found in her to say, which in turn gave her a satisfying feeling of penetrating her community of study.

Nodding, Bobinga Iroko added: "Hopefully, we will be luckier next time. We've decided to arm key students with digital cameras and camcorders, just in case. We mean business. These people have got to be exposed as the phoneyes that they are, for the world to see..."

"I think you're doing a great job at *The Talking Drum*," Lilly Loveless complimented. "What's your editorial policy, by the way?"

"What a question! Don't you read our motto on the top right hand corner of the front page of the paper?"

"I do, but declared intentions are known to vary from practice like night and day."

"We are as solid as the African bobinga and iroko and as constant as your northern star. Why do you think I am called Bobinga Iroko?"

"You tell me."

"It means crushing resilience, steadfastness and commitment to the truth even in the face of crippling adversities. I'm proud to be associated with *The Talking Drum*, the finest in African journalism."

"So what do you really stand for?"

"Simple: Everything that is clear is bent, everything that is bent is clear."

"What?"

"We have no permanent friends, no permanent enemies. We are tireless seekers after truth."

"I see," said Lilly Loveless, contemplatively. "So in many ways you are like us, social scientists?"

"I don't know about that, but I do know we journalists love socialising. How would we come by stories otherwise?"

"Absolutely," replied Lilly Loveless. "In the social sciences, we set out to expose the facts, the bare facts, the naked truth... We take everything

with a grain of salt and make sure it rings true with other things we've heard or know..."

"What is so social about that? Why don't you just call yourselves journalists of the sciences?"

Lilly Loveless chuckled. She almost told Bobinga Iroko that would not be respectful, as most social scientists loathe being compared to journalists, even when what they do is less than poor journalism. She was fortunate she didn't, for Bobinga Iroko had a history of telling off university professors, most of whom he was convinced were nitwits, some of whom accused him of being sponsored to go after them. Few believed that his sole motivation was a professional commitment to exposing the facts, the bare facts, and quite simply, the naked truth. He didn't either.

"As journalists we do more than mirror the society," added Bobinga Iroko, proudly. "We seek to eliminate the ugly and enhance the beautiful."

Reading the sceptical look on the face of Lilly Loveless, he hastily added: "At least we at *The Talking Drum* do."

Suddenly Lilly Loveless remembered not having seen or heard of Dr Mukala-Satannie in the last few days. She asked: "Dr Mukala-Satannie, is he keeping well?"

"He's fine, but he's gone into hiding. He feels more and more like a lion in a cage. It was rumoured that the VC wanted him arrested."

"What for?"

"Contempt of a public institution and its legitimate authorities."

"Why not sue him in court if they feel he has done something wrong?"

"It is easier to arrest than to judge." Bobinga Iroko was tongue in cheek.

"But they can't harm him, can they?" She suddenly remembered that being a Muzunguland citizen and married to a wife employed directly and posted to Mimboland by the government of Muzunguland, Dr Mukala-Satannie had immunities.

"No, they can't harm him. His wife's diplomatic status spills over to him generously. I told him this, but his cowardice denies him the courage to take chances." Bobinga Iroko laughed and shook his head before adding, "We're sick and tired of clowns playing God in our lives, and are determined to change this land of Mimbo, willy-nilly."

Frightening place, Mimboland, Lilly Loveless told herself. She felt sorry for Dr Mukala-Satannie, and even more so for Dr Wiseman Lovemore.

"Don't forget to take me along, next time you go to visit my friend," she told Bobinga Iroko.

"I plan to go there tomorrow at midday with the deputy president of the trade union of university lecturers, Chief Dr Mantrouble Anyway."

"Count me in," said Lilly Loveless, thinking: What a name!

* * *

The drive to Sakersbeach was super. Lilly Loveless took in the beautiful scenery. The road was graced on both sides by hectares upon hectares of palms that reached into the hills beyond and that went all the way down to within a few kilometres from the Manawabay of the Atlantic Ocean. Bobinga Iroko told her the plantation belonged to the Mimboland

Development Corporation, set up since the colonial days, and fed by a labour force harvested forcefully from the hinterlands, because of the erroneous belief by the Muzungulanders that the sons and daughters of the native soil were averse to hard physical labour and only engaged in it to satisfy basic needs. Because the Muzungulanders had hated to abandon what they'd spent so much energy and genius to bring about and to keep going, they had fought tooth and nail to ensure that independence changed nothing in reality. Thus, the management had stayed firmly in the hands of the Muzungulanders who had ensured that the labour force stayed firmly in the hands of the Mimbolanders. There was not a single year that the workers did not go on strike at least four times, and not a single strike yielded the desired results. Divide-and-rule was the order of the day at the plantation, where the handful of workers from the local ethnic group were often made to feed on the illusion that they mattered more than the majority ethnic others, and that it was in their interest to spy and report on "these troublesome cam-no-gos".

"Why are they felling so many of the palms?" inquired Lilly Loveless.

"In order to renew the plantation," Bobinga Iroko explained. "Every ten years or so, the older generation of palms have to be replaced by younger, better-researched and better-yielding palms. You have scientists working in laboratories all year long, experimenting on different new varieties in order to increase production..."

"What are those people doing with plastic containers around the felled palms?"

"Those are some of the plantation workers harvesting palm wine. It is a very popular wine known locally as Matutu. A glass of it is enough to knock you out. Ten times more powerful than Mimbo-Wanda, your favourite. Like to try some?"

"On our way back, perhaps." Lilly Loveless didn't want anything to stand in the way of her reunion with the beach.

They came to a check point, the third of the journey.

"Why are there so many checkpoints?" asked Lilly Loveless. This was a question she had wanted to ask since the drive from Sawang to Puttkamerstown. She remembered counting more than fifteen checkpoints that day of her arrival.

"In a land of Mimbo, security is paramount," replied Bobinga Iroko, feigning seriousness.

"And why are the policemen and gendarmes at checkpoints always in pairs?"

"Because they are only minimally educated."

"So the one who can read depends on the other who can write, and vice versa?"

"Absolutely," said Bobinga Iroko. "But they are also in pairs, so the one can snatch your car documents, while the other negotiates how much bribe you should pay to get them back."

"That's very clever, won't you say?"

"Very clever indeed!"

"How come they don't ask you for a bribe?"

"I have a 'Presse Laissez-Passer' sticker on the windscreen of the car," explained Bobinga Iroko, pointing at the white sticker with the national colours stamped on it. "And they all know me, and loathe having me write

negatively about them in *The Talking Drum*."

Bobinga Iroko drove her straight to the beach. "Watch out for very uncultured locals who comb the beach desperately seeking cultural freaks", he told Lilly Loveless, a dry smile on his face. "You sure will be struck by their handsome forms, but there's much more to life than good looks," he exploded in laughter.

"Don't," said Lilly Loveless. "I can take care of myself."

"The Botanic Gardens and other touristic sites will have to wait for later," he told her.

He dropped her off, agreed on when to come back for her, and went for his appointment to interview the topmost politician of the region on burning issues.

* * *

Lilly Loveless wasn't disappointed in the least with her reunion. The beach would always have a place in her heart, day or night, under the sun or in the rain, crowded or quiet. She'd been to quite a few natural beaches in her life, and none has quite measured up to the scintillating encounter she had with the sun, sand and sea today in Sakersbeach. It was simply the ultimate dream come true – a tropical paradise in every sense of sun, sand and sea. What places the experience in a class beyond first is the fact that the view and tranquillity are not disturbed by the relentless flow of tourists in a hurry. There she was, lying on her back, reading leisurely, unperturbed. Not even by local youths seeking to string themselves to imagined milk and honey by playing love with lust. When it comes to nature, Mimboland is turning out to be a perfect paradise – mystical, inviting, fulfilling and taming.

This exquisite encounter with Sakersbeach took her mind back to Sunsandland, one of the African touristic destinations most celebrated in her native Muzunguland. The beaches were great, but she was never allowed to explore and enjoy them by herself, in her own way. There were all these beach bumsters who, in their daily quest to turn sand into gold, would not let her. They insisted they would force feed her not only with their own accounts of the local history, but also, with their own idea of what it means to have a good time as a Muzungu tourist in Africa. Theirs was a very very thin sketch of the tourist and her desires. They came with drugs, sex, love, and ambitions of Muzunguland in mind. The heavy presence of soldiers on the beach did not deter them. Those forced out of the beach, resorted to hanging around markets, hotels, nightclubs and other locations where tourists could easily be spotted and to whom they sold themselves as easy minglers and bearers of unhurried ecstasy for all in need of unwinding.

Never before had Lilly Loveless been the subject of such prying and preying attention. Being young, she was particularly attractive. Young men came up to her in fairly large groups, but she also attracted older men who were mesmerised by her youth. The harassment she got at the beach during the day, did not diminish when she was sitting at the hotel bar having a drink, taking a dip in the pool to cool down, or when she was at the nightclub, or walking on the streets. The glossy brochures that had come with her ticket from the travel agent had done more than exaggerate when they claimed it was possible for a woman to be alone at the beach in Sunsandland, sharing an ocean of emotions, with or without being on the same wave

length.

Then one day she told herself, what the heck. Why not play along with one of them, and see what they're really up to. She had been wedded to an appearance of honesty all her life, and had to mask her occasional manipulation of men to shower her with gifts. Her mom, who took her appearance of honesty for real, would never believe her ears, if she were to tell her one day, that right there under her nose in Bruhlville, she sometimes strips and lap dances for men. Not on a grand scale like some of her friends who have given up their degrees to become sex workers permanently, but something all the same, which she does not do for the money, but for the curiosity and thrill of it, and because she believes in a woman's right to appreciate her body and use it the way she likes. She has been at war against social stigma from the day she was made to feel incomplete as a child following the divorce of her parents. Lilly Loveless has often wondered, "If it is poverty that pushes girls into doing this in Mimboland and elsewhere in Africa, then what accounts for it in my case, because I am not poor?"

But the bumster she eventually warmed up to wasn't up to it. The first day they were supposed to meet at the restaurant. But he came early – to her hotel and called up from the reception, then came up to the room. He sat on the bed as she finished preparing to go out. She went to a mirror to add mascara to her lashes. She ran her fingers through her hair and sprayed gel on it, adding texture. With concentration she spread her lips, making them smooth, and applied lipstick, first to the upper lip, from the centre, then the lower lip, from left to right. Then she rubbed upper and lower lips together to smooth the colour in. She clicked the cover on the lipstick, set it on the table, and looked at her bumster to show she was ready to go. She was surprised when he said, "But you didn't put any perfume on," as if she were still only half dressed. He detested the restaurant – not in his habits – and was only too happy to return to the hotel room later on in the evening, this time for undressing. That was done hurriedly. Before she knew it, he was on top of her, sweating like a waterfall. And, because he refused to wear a condom, coming all over, flooding the silver ring on her belly button. When she asked him why he didn't use a condom, he retorted: "If you want to take a bath and you put on a raincoat, can you really claim you have taken a bath?" Lilly Loveless didn't know what to make of it.

To Lilly Loveless, nothing is worse than bad sex and nothing better than good sex. When she alluded to it later, he claimed the hotel had probably intimidated him. "Next time we'll go somewhere I'm comfortable with, and you'll see the difference."

The next time came much sooner, the next day. They met for a drink. And he said he wanted her. It was evening. She mounted his motorbike behind him. And he steered across town to a discreet "restaurant of some kind." He negotiated the price, and he followed her up the stairs, his hand fondling her buttocks, and murmuring something about liquid sensations and dreams. She sensed his excitement. The room was sparse, a bed with sheets and a few condoms, a Bible on the bedside cupboard and a candle on a table. She thought of lighting the candle to add some atmosphere to the place. But there were no matches. He was obviously perturbed when she insisted. And irritated came back from the reception with matches. Finally, they undressed. He took her, as he had done before. She doesn't remember much. The

experience was sparse, kind of like the room. After washing himself up in the bathroom and wiping himself off her with a towel, he began pulling his trousers on. She looked surprisingly at him from the bed, where she was resting up a bit. He saw the question in her eyes and said, "I only paid for half an hour."

The man left her perplexed. On his way home he came by a billboard advertisement for a mattress that said 'New Dimensions of Sleeping'. As the artist he insisted he was, he always had colour on him. He took a permanent blue magic marker from his bag and drew near to the board, crossed out the word Sleeping and wrote Coming below it. On the mattress he drew two intertwined ecstatic feet. And he continued on his way, wondering if she'd notice it on her way out.

That was that with the man who came early, and left quickly.

For this reason, their encounter ended even more quickly than it had started.

Then Lilly Loveless had another experience. She was lying in a hammock one night when an unattractive man of about thirty came to talk to her, wanting to take her out. "You look as if you know what I need," he introduced himself and suggested they go to a local bar nearby, where locally brewed gin was freely available at a suicidally giveaway price. "This is the place to mingle with the locals," he added. She could see he was all fired up, a 'come on baby set me on fire' look steaming in his hellish eyes. She told him that she was worth more than a couple of gins, and he started talking real figures, but they were pittance so she told him to leave her alone. His friend came over next, a muscular, younger attractive man. And, as she soon found out, an excellent flirter and a delicious kisser. His manly lips were simply the best she had felt. He made magic with them. The excitement of kissing a man when every time is the first time was what swept Lilly Loveless off her feet.

There is something about Lilly Loveless and kissing. She simply loves kissing. To her kissing is not just a stop on the road to sex. It's a whole experience in itself beckoning to be celebrated. She loves the intimacy, the closeness that comes with kissing. Sharing lips and sharing tongues thrill her beyond words. Whether it is short sharp pecks on the lips, slightly longer, open mouthed or tongue twister Muzungu kisses, she simply adores them. With the right person, her tongue is always ready for friendly fights, playing tongue battles, and tender licking. She is particularly scintillated when her bottom lip is sucked intermittently. When the back of her neck is kissed, she feels tingly all over.

Even when Lilly Loveless was not with him, she would be on the phone to him: "simply to let you know how much I enjoyed your kisses earlier today, after you finished zipping up my top. A tender one to the neck. A second... to my calf. And a third... to the air... Amazing ... how the thought of the kisses is as real and strong as the kisses and kissing and being kissed itself... See you later Sweetie Pie...Ciao!"

Good kisser as he was, the bumster also expected Lilly Loveless to buy petrol for his motorbike or bendskin, beer and local gin, airtime for his cell phone, nightclub entrance fees, and the like, just because she found him handsome, had money written on her forehead, or appeared like a wallet on legs. Then the thought went through her mind: why am I kissing this man when I could be getting paid for it? He is attractive. We are on a palm fringed

beach. Why not? Age is salient because my youthfulness gives me the freedom to pick and choose which men I want to kiss or do business with. Moreover, the fact that I am far from desperate means that I can do the manipulating, not vice versa. Here in Sunsandland, there are a lot of beach bumsters, many of whom hook up with old Muzungu ladies. It makes us laugh because all the contrasts are there: a white woman and a black man, a young man and an older woman, a rich woman and a poor man...

Lilly Loveless remembered not wanting to leave Sunsandland. A lot had happened following her meeting with her kisser bumster. Much hunger fed, many more desires awoken. She returned to Muzunguland despite herself, to feed on memories and dream her desires. It was a pity that the best wine of her short stay in Sunsandland should have been kept for so late in the day. But her thoughts and feelings were staying behind, even as she boarded the plane back to the monotony of her daily existence.

A few days after her return, she sent him an email that ended with the words: 'The pain of leaving you is as acute now as it was when I boarded the plane. So many things have happened in the meantime, but you've never been out of my thoughts. How I long to hold you close and kiss you deep: missing you like this really hurts. There's a continuous gnawing ache reminding me of you all the time. Something like hunger, but more persistent, weighing me down in a flood of reminiscences.'

This must have been the cue he needed. Lilly Loveless' phone rang, and without bothering to find out who was at the other end of the line, the kisser said his lines obviously borrowed from a magazine or novel.

"My Dear Lilly Loveless," he began. "Imagine me with you in Bruhlville. It is almost dinner time. You are standing in the kitchen preparing something to eat when you feel me behind you, sliding my firm African hands round your waist and softly kissing your neck... You know I want you.... As you feel my hands slide up your waist to your breasts, I gently tease your nipples, still kissing your neck and whispering in your ear that I can't wait much longer, I need to take you, right here, right now..."

He ran out of airtime, but not before irreparable damage had been done.

It was Martin her boyfriend who received the call, his last.

Lilly Loveless remembered being philosophical about the way things ended: "Everyone who comes into or leaves our lives is a mirror for something inside us that we are not seeing", was what she told her mom who would not stop complaining about the fact that things had ended with Martin.

Deep in reverie Lilly Loveless imagined her kisser bumster lying by her side at this quiet lover's paradise of Sakersbeach. With her eyes closed, she felt him do what he did best. He brought his thick, sensuous, passionate lips to ignite hers, and she was all on fire, burning with desire...

The fire of desire found satisfaction in fantasies. Lilly Loveless remembered thinking years ago, as she walked through a crowded shopping mall in her native Bruhlville: what would it be like to approach some relaxed-looking tall, handsome, sexy young man her age and lay a kiss on him? Would he take advantage of a passionate kiss with a stranger? Would she earn herself a black eye? Would it be exciting, or disappointing? Both? What if she dazed him by flashing her tits to say: 'Be a man - take me, use me, dump

me'? She fantasized about breaking some of the other intriguing taboos, such as sex with an extra man or woman in the picture, the way only exhibitionists or the porn industry know best. Was that too weird, too counter-culture, too dark and wrong? Or was it a valid sexual exploration that she was ashamed of due only to society's wagging finger?

* * *

Through with his interview, Bobinga Iroko came back and met Lilly Loveless, still sunbathing and reading *A Nose for Money*, which Britney had strongly recommended, and which she was discovering to be quite relevant to her theme. It was by the author of the paper Lilly Loveless had read, and a copy of which she had brought with intentions of giving to Dr Wiseman Lovemore, but had not got round to it before what happened. An idea crossed her mind. What if she were to write to the author something like: 'Your work is of great interest to me. Writing is another passion of mine and I have all these ideas in my head which I hope to capture in a book sometime in this lifetime. I was wondering if you could take me under your wing and allow me to pick your brains. When I stumbled across your work, I knew I had found a gem and I would be deeply humbled and honoured to be mentored by you. Thank you very much for your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.' How would he react? Would this inflate his ego? Or would he remain modest and reply? Why not try and see...?

Lilly Loveless resolved to find out his address and write when she was back in Bruhlville. But that would have to wait until she had read the book. Like with Dr Wiseman Lovemore's paper which she was yet to read, she had an ambivalent feeling about reading the novel. Captivating though the blurb was, she feared going beyond the first few pages of the novel because she didn't want the book to influence her thinking even before she had the opportunity to analyse things for herself. So, after the first few pages of the book, she closed it and promised herself not to open it again until she was safely back home and writing up.

Bobinga Iroko noticed the book and wanted to start a conversation on the contents, but was stopped by Lilly Loveless.

"I don't want to know... I don't want to know... I don't want to know..." She told him, blocking her ears with both hands.

Bobinga Iroko moved on to another topic. He suggested they take a walk. Lilly Loveless agreed, but only after a dip.

Bobinga Iroko changed rapidly into his swimming trunks, and together they threw themselves at the gentle waves and enjoyed the sensitive fingers of the irresistible sea water massage them. To Lilly Loveless, this was almost as good as the soft hands of Martin that, aided by massage oils, used to make her smile infinitely with pleasure until things got sour between them. Bobinga Iroko and she loved every second of the encounter and didn't notice the time pass until an hour and thirty minutes later. But there was also a burning desire to walk along the beach, which they succumbed to, and which offered them an opportunity to talk about all and nothing. It was simply magnificent. When they came across little turtles, Bobinga Iroko talked about turtles doing it, and went on to inform Lilly Loveless that you can tell a male turtle because his underside, unlike a female's which is just flat, is concave, to facilitate shell mounting. What a man, Lilly Loveless thought, so refreshingly

and wonderfully uninhibited. So nutty! She wondered just how uninhibited he would be, if she were to suggest that she would like to feel him next to her, his knees nestling into her side as she looked up into his laughing eyes...

When they returned to the car, it was already getting dark. Going to the Botanic Gardens would have to wait for another day, they decided, and went for roasted fish at one of the loveliest restaurant-bars along the port. As they waited for their fish while sipping their beer, they watched fishermen return to display their catch for market women, house wives and restaurant owners to pick and choose for cash. Lilly Loveless loved every second of it.

All of a sudden, there was unexpected drama: not by market women struggling for the choicest fish; not by the truck pushers fighting over who should carry what for whom. The drama came from a couple in the restaurant, sitting a few tables away from Bobinga Iroko and Lilly Loveless. It was a man and his wife, having dinner on her birthday, so it eventually unfolded. There was the alert of an SMS on the man's cell phone from his girlfriend informing him that she, all oiled up and shiny, was wearing his favourite thong and wanted to see him right away for the time of his life. Curious, the wife wanted to know whom the SMS was from. The man lied to his wife that the text message was from his mother wishing his wife happy birthday. The wife asked to see the message, but the man was desperately trying to delete it in his shirt pocket. The wife finally snatched the phone from him and read the message out loud to the hearing of everyone in the restaurant. Then she says: "My husband does not want to look at me, he wants a thong but wouldn't see mine." She takes up her skirt to reveal the cute thong she is wearing which her husband doesn't notice. Then she storms out, leaving her husband to clear up the mess of his actions.

"Come on. Everybody else does it and hides it, I do it and just don't hide it, so what is the big deal with you hypocrites?" The man tried to brush off the stares on him with thoughts he hadn't the courage to translate into words.

"Mimboland na Mimboland," said Bobinga Iroko, when the husband, unable to bear the stares, abandoned his food as well, paid his bill and walked out to face his second surprise of the evening: his wife had vandalised his fancy new car beyond recognition.

"I know them well," Bobinga Iroko added.

"You do?" Lilly Loveless was interested.

"They don't like me, but they are used to my pieces and I know them very well. The man hates my guts as a journalist. He once accused me of publishing a critical paper about him, when I discovered that a timber exploration concession registered under his name was in effect being exploited by ruthless Muzunglanders without any respect for the tropics they claimed to adore, nor for the local communities that have preserved the forest for thousands of years through religious taboos and rituals."

"He who harms the environment can't be a friend of mine," said Lilly Loveless.

"I'm sure the Muzungulander business interests he represents pay him enough to live on, and by our local standards, to pass for a very rich man with a reputation for talking women into taking off their clothes. He is known locally as 'Lovebird Masa Moni', 'the youngest living old man' and also as 'l'homme des belles femmes', because whatever comes in as money, he shows

it off in ostentatious consumption with young, voluptuous, beautiful girls. He can't see a juicy fruit without wanting to eat it. His wife, who dramatized here a while ago, is not the only wife he has. She is the third and youngest – 'My Bubbly Brown Sugar' he called her when he wooed her, and is still doing her studies at UM. She married him three years ago, at a wedding that was termed the wedding of the year here in Sakersbeach. There is nothing he didn't do to impress her, and there is nothing she didn't do to impress her friends. It is probably one of those friends now seeking to undo her in the war of the thongs..." Bobinga Iroko was speaking like a tape recording, full of insights.

"You know what a thong is, don't you?" Bobinga Iroko had a mischievous smile in his eyes.

"No, tell me what it is," Lilly Loveless laughed and took out her pen. She was beginning to absorb Bobinga Iroko's every word like the way blotting paper absorbs ink.

"It has more material than a G-String."

"Really?"

"Anyone who has done window shopping or been at the market when a bale of second-hand underwear is being opened knows these things."

"Did you see the 'read my hips' manner in which she walked out?"

"A woman who walks with such a seductive sway is unlikely to be ovulating."

"You mean likely..."

"That's what I used to mean until I read this piece in the *New Scientist*..."

"You do really ferret, don't you?" Lilly Loveless was impressed.

Bobinga Iroko laughed out his modesty, and added: "Here in Mimboland, one either has an MBA or is an MBA."

"What do you mean? Everyone is into business administration or something?"

Bobinga Iroko laughed before explaining. "An MBA here means Married but Available."

Lilly Loveless exploded in laughter. "That's very funny."

"Yes, MBA is our business: we either are married but available, or have someone who is married but available."

"Bobinga Iroko included?"

"No comment." He laughed. "Do you know how to determine whether someone is having an affair or not?"

"Tell me."

"You know someone is having an affair when they feel unusually happy and light within themselves, as if they've met with Angel Gabriel. For a woman, she starts walking as if she's got springs on her heels, her underwear suddenly begins to look more and more like thongs and G-Strings, she starts watching every word she says as she fears betraying her little new secret, and if you watch closely, you begin to see funny marks on prominent aspects of her anatomy."

"You need to be intimately close to notice that about her."

"Of course, I meant the husband or a very close friend," replied Bobinga Iroko. "Otherwise, what is there for a perfect stranger seeking to know who is having or not having an affair? Except an idle Muzungu

researcher called Loveless."

"Your wife plays around too?"

"Have I told you I am married?" replied Bobinga Iroko, evasively.

Lilly Loveless smiled insistently, not knowing why getting any personal information from this man was like pulling a tooth.

"OK, let's suppose I have a wife," he laughed. "I would say she doesn't need to play around. I'll string her G-spot every time. I know how to please her. She comes every time. How many men could do that for her? She'd get impatient with a new guy fooling around to figure her out."

"Why hypothetical?"

"It is better that way. Then you can explore different scenarios. Reality is much too fixed, don't you think? To fall in love is immediately to dread the loss of the object of desire, so better to be hypothetically married than actually married, I think, hypothetically speaking, of course."

"I give up," said Lilly Loveless. Smiling, she asked: "And men – how do you know they are having an affair?"

"With men, the signs are that suddenly, they start being conscious of their dressing, going on mission a lot, and calling their wives names they've never heard before, especially when dreaming or making love. These days, a sure way of sniffing an affair is by reading through your partner's sent text messages. And if your partner is always erasing his or her messages, know you have a smoking gun. Treat as suspect a partner who lives in fear of text messages and whose inbox and sent folders are always empty."

"Why exactly do people frown on cheating, especially by women? It can reluctantly be tolerated in men, but women, never. If women cheat despite the fact that cheating is not granted them at all, what could be the reasons?"

"In Mimboland, women cheat for various reasons, major amongst which is the need to live a life that is not theirs. The pressures on them to dress well, do their hair, buy this and that, be here or there in a class and in places above their means or attainments, push them into the open arms of affairs with men who are either pretending or honest about bringing them to consumer paradise."

"Surely, that can't be the only reason women cheat," Lilly Loveless protested.

"You are not as good a listener as I thought," Bobinga Iroko rebuked, playfully. "Consumerism is a major reason, but there are others. Some women cheat because their men have done it, leaving them unhappy, lonely or feeling neglected. They also cheat simply because they, in essence, are just like men, wanting great sex and variety beyond the monotony and ability of regular partners to provide, however creative these might be at self-reconfiguration."

Lilly Loveless wrote frantically in her notebook. She liked what Bobinga Iroko said. "And why, according to you, are women seldom open and bold about their affairs? Why don't they boast of these in public in the same way as men do?"

"The answer is simple, I think," replied Bobinga Iroko. "Vis-à-vis one's partner, the lying, economy with the truth, clandestinity and hide-and-seek that come with having an affair is like the turn-on exhibitionists get from knowing that they are watched, and together with the sex, must make affairs

really pleasurable and difficult to call off. Another reason might simply be that women are less animated by the trophy mentality that drives men, so they don't display and parade their affairs the way a sportsman does his trophies."

"You are a real expert, aren't you?" said Lilly Loveless. Returning to the row, she asked of the man, "You say he is married to three wives?"

"Yes, and when friends ask him: 'Masa, why you get plenty fine fine woman them so, you di comot outside go chase plenty more?' he would say; 'You no know say latrine for corner house de smell plenty?' On other occasions he would say: 'If you have a farm, does that mean you can't have a garden as well?' Super, isn't it?"

"If you say so," replied Lilly Loveless, beckoning to the waiter to bring her another drink. "I've also heard that plenty corner-corner lovers is not good," she added, imitating his pidgin intonation.

"To be fair to the man, he worships women," said Bobinga Iroko. "He is even rumoured to have slept with more than 1000 women and to have decided how he would like to die. 'On a woman and surrounded by women, just as I have lived my life,' he tells his friends. 'And with my hand firmly on the well rounded youthful breast of the most beautiful of them,' he adds with a sensuous chuckle, his eyes closed in imagined pleasure."

"I wish him luck," said Lilly Loveless.

Beer preceded the fish, which was taken with beer and followed by beer. Soon Bobinga Iroko was in no state to drive.

"Let's go to the nightclub," he suggested. "Let's sweat away the beer on the dance floor to the tune of lovely Mimbo music."

Lilly Loveless liked the idea.

They opted for Black & White, one of the most popular in Sakersbeach. Bobinga Iroko managed to drive up to a friend's place on Church Street where they parked the car, and walked leisurely to the nightclub at the Bay Hotel. On their way they passed young and old women of all shapes and sizes, dressed in skimpy attire and headed in the same direction.

"These are night butterflies," Bobinga Iroko whispered. "You'll see the younger of them in the nightclub, but the older ones are heading for the bars, chicken parlours and other popular spots. All of them are fishers of men..."

Lilly Loveless listened without saying much in return until her curiosity was caught by a range of houses where several lit kerosene lamps were hanging on door posts.

"What are those lamps for?" she asked.

"Those?" smiled Bobinga Iroko. "They are signposts by night butterflies, inviting men to come and sample their wares," he explained. "'Ma skin di itch for come,' is what the lamps are saying to those who understand their language."

"How ingenious!" replied Lilly Loveless. "It reminds me of the red-light district back in Bruhlville. Do they ever run out of fuel, those lamps?" she asked.

"As long as there's no catch, the lamps stay fuelled," said Bobinga Iroko. "They are like the bait of the fishermen. You don't expect a catch if your hook is baitless, do you? And once you've caught something, you save

the rest of your bait for next time. So when we are coming back from the nightclub, you'll be able to determine who has been lucky for the night, from whose lamp has retired."

"Fascinating," said Lilly Loveless, remembering to make notes as soon as possible while the ideas were still fresh in her mind.

Black & White was already bustling with young men and women when they got there. Bobinga Iroko paid for two tickets and the muscular bouncers in dark sunglasses tore the tickets and let them through the narrow entrance.

The dance floor was active and the song couldn't have been better timed. In the song, the singer, a man, wants to know what love is. The woman replies "there's no such thing as love". Shocked, the man asks what she means. "Love is what you tell the person you are with. Today it is me, tomorrow it is her. But when I watch your actions, I'm a fool to treasure your words."

Very profound, Lilly Loveless noted, and asked Bobinga Iroko for the name of the artist. They spotted a place to sit at the far end, from where Lilly Loveless could watch the dancing, pick up tips about the dance steps before venturing onto the floor. Only too aware of the comment she got in Sunsandland when she instinctively attempted to respond to the wild frenzy of African drumming - 'If you were dancing for survival, you'd die before the day breaks,' her partner had mocked - Lilly Loveless was cautious not to rush into things.

Song followed song. Some, Lilly Loveless could follow, others she didn't understand.

"What is the singer saying about breast milk?" Lilly Loveless asked Bobinga Iroko, her attention drawn to a tune that made people rush to the dance floor.

"He is one of our naughtiest musicians. He claims he can't do without breast milk. He likes sucking inspiration from women. Just can't get enough of what's inside them! Be careful if he puts his tongue to your tit! His lips will soon be around you and he'll suck and suck and suck. If we were to caricature him, he would have the biggest jaws of anyone in Mimboland. Suckling is essential to his ability to survive, you see, and flourish as an artist. He's an adult suckler, a forever suckler. For him, suckling must be better than sex!"

"I shan't flash my tits at him."

"You don't need to flash to have him coming."

"He sounds desperate. What is his name?"

"I shan't tell you," said Bobinga Iroko. "You need all the protection you can get," he smiled.

"Bobinga Iroko, you are fun to be with," said Lilly Loveless with playful sincerity.

It didn't take them long. Soon they were up, dancing to a wide variety of music forms from the rich menu served by the versatile DJ.

Bobinga Iroko explained the music forms and the contents of the songs to Lilly Loveless as they danced. She insisted they dance next to the table where they sat and where she had her notebook ready, so she could note down from time to time what he told her about the music.

Lilly Loveless noticed right away that the music was different from

what she had fallen for in Sunsandland. It was gentler and softer, and the drumming wasn't the same intense, intoxicating frenzy. But the themes were just as rich.

Bobinga Iroko was a casual and relaxed dancer, quite unlike the vigorous, suggestive styles of the others on the floor, which he dismissed as nothing but perpendicular expressions of horizontal desires. He responded well to the rhythm, and did the occasional wriggle and what he termed "*balle à terre*": wriggling until you touch the floor with your bum. But he didn't overdo anything, unlike others who turned, twisted, wriggled, jumped and pulled themselves so vigorously and with such repetition that they took all the joy out of dancing, as far as he was concerned.

Lilly Loveless could fit in both ways, but as a beginner and new to the music, she preferred Bobinga Iroko's soft and gentle self-assured style.

The music poured out. Lilly Loveless paid particular attention to songs on the theme of love, power and consumption, and couldn't believe her ears when virtually every song had something to do with one or all of these aspects of her research. There was the song about a certain Masa Ngongari, who feels that he is smarter than most, and is chasing after someone's wife whom he falsely claims is his cousin. The man tells him "*locot*", for he doesn't understand this type of cousin. In a similar song a man warns: "watch out, don't touch my cat... If you touch my cat, don't touch its tail."

A woman cries out: "I have seven lovers, all desire me, what am I to do?" A fourth song claims: "Man is the belly and the under belly, and all is won". A perplexed man screams: "Frankly I am baffled when you say you no longer know me: what's your thong doing at my place?" A woman challenges: "It's you who said you can... here I am, show me that you can..." Someone wonders: "Why are so many women fighting for him?" A man replies: "For his Stick of Authority. They are dying to feel within the commanding fullness of him."

In another song, a lousy lover leaves a girl totally disappointed, and instead of owning up to his worthlessness in matters of life and death, tries to wriggle himself out of his inadequacies by complaining the girl's perfume "*smelt like grilled fish*". There was a lovely song with the phrase: "The husband of another is sweet ... the wife of another is sweet..." The drunken voice of a woman calls out: "Darling, I love you... take me, I'm yours..." The woman continues: "What do you want me to say for you to touch me, to embrace me? ...show me red, make love to me..."

A sweet melodic voice is disarmingly modest in her request for: "Just a little love", in a song – Ndolo – that filled Bobinga Iroko with reminiscences he declined to share, offering instead, to dance to it chest to chest with Lilly Loveless, his eyes firmly closed. This was followed by a succession of sweet, slow, glowing Zouk, freshly delivered from the Caribbean like early morning roses from the Botanic Gardens. Bobinga Iroko didn't explain much; their enthusiastic embrace of the music did the talking.

Then there was the rawest, crudest, most uninhibited bunch of them all. One, whose songs were very popular, judging from how many times they were played, was luring in his provocativeness and irresistibly obscene. In one song he describes himself as "the defence lawyer for women", but proceeds in the same song and others to invite men to "inject", "pump", "pierce", "drill", "fill up", and, like the praying mantis, "kill this evening"

and “finish off” the very same women he loves and protects.

In another a young woman is crying out “it hurts... it hurts very, very much...” but can’t resist inviting the man to be more venturesome in the way he explores and switches on her buttons. While embracing her invitation, the man playfully labels her “aratatata chop die”.

A woman in yet another song, impatient with a man’s attempts at foreplay, screams: “No begin tune ma bobi like radio, slap me kanas for las.”

A man menaces: “Since I see a well packaged ndombolised derriere, if you joke, I’m going to inject you...”

The music made Lilly Loveless recall a paper she had read by an astute observer of men and women at play. The paper was about a society where people are easy prey to generalised promiscuity engendered by poverty and beleaguered desire. The author talked of “phallocracy or the dictatorship of the penis” being the order of the day, stretching from the helm of state through universities and schools down to the ghettos and villages. In that society, the pride that came with having “an active penis” was enormous and to be dramatized daily, as men championed their pleasure through subduing women.

Most of the songs were interspaced by the names of people, whom Bobinga Iroko explained to Lilly Loveless were big men who had probably paid the artists some money to sing good things about them, so they could be even bigger men. Music to these men was a signpost on which to advertise their prominence, ambitions and desires.

In one song, a young man who has lived through the thick and thin of the ghetto, finds reason to celebrate the appointment of his brother into ‘very high office’. The appointment is an opportunity not to miss, given how much his brother has struggled and sacrificed to be appointed: His brother has been to see renowned pygmy witchdoctors to grease his way and fortify him, and has gone through most trying experiences such as crossing dangerous rivers and sleeping for days with his nose dipped in water. He even danced naked, feet in fire, with old chimpanzees, not to mention the barks of trees, herbs and concoctions which he has eaten and drunk. It had been rumoured several times before, but nothing came through. Today, rumour has been transformed into noble truth by a presidential decree broadcast on state radio and television.

The young man envisions his brother’s appointment changing his life in a big way – ‘my life is going to change’, ‘at last I am going to relax’ like a baobab of achievement and power, as ‘suffering has ended’. The days of trekking, sandwiches, and struggle in overloaded taxis are over. He anticipates riding in his own car, an air-conditioned Mercedes, going into the inner cities to fetch vulnerable girls – especially those who turned him down when he was nobody – who can’t resist anyone with a car.

He also looks forward to winning tenders, which he has no intention to honour, given the protection he is sure to receive from his brother in high office. He would move up to live with those in beautiful residential areas, keeping his old friends and relations at a distance. He would limit access to his cell phone, and employ a stern guard to keep visitors at bay with false accounts of his whereabouts. At last he would be able to travel abroad to see beautiful sights, indulge in delicacies such as smoked salmon, and shop in hard currency. It is going to be hectic, as he spoils himself by association with

power, privilege and comfort.

On the dance floor, Lilly Loveless could almost read people's fantasies in their faces, in their wriggles, and in the way they moved their bodies... In her notebook she noted: 'This place is pregnant with desired meaning and the meaning of desire.' Even Bobinga Iroko said as much, in his usual provocative, disdainful and investigative manner: "What rules this land of Mimbo is not the Longstays who keep re-inventing sterility. What rules it is the Mimbo in all and sundry or what you see on the dance floor: ambitions of the body and the body of ambition."

Girls - young, younger and youngest bubbled with desire. They danced with men of all shapes and sizes like butterflies celebrating an early arrival of spring. There were older women as well, but the tensions of age and aging did not quite let them enjoy the music, at least so claimed Bobinga Iroko, who shared a story on this with Lilly Loveless.

"Nightclubs are not places for women like those," he pointed at two amply bulky women more than half eaten up by age, giving the music their best on the dance floor in the company of an equally elderly man whose attention was completely consumed by the surrounding nimbleness of youth.

"I see nothing wrong with them," Lilly Loveless countered. "They are enjoying themselves."

"With a man who is enjoying himself without them," Bobinga Iroko chuckled. "Look where his eyes are looking."

"But that doesn't mean that he is not enjoying their company."

"You are just arguing for the sake of argument."

"I'm serious..."

In a lighter mood, Bobinga Iroko asked: "What is the difference between a girl of 8 or 18 and a woman of 28, 38, 48, 58, 68 or 78?"

"I don't know, you tell me," Lilly Loveless said, casually, not knowing what he was up to next.

"One of our politicians recently said the difference was 'bobi tanap' and 'bobi don fall', comparing the first to the opposition and the latter to the ruling party."

"What did he mean by that?"

"Firm upright inexperienced tits, as opposed to tits flattened or ironed by age, practice and motherhood."

"Was he of the opposition or the government?"

"He was the opposition in government."

"And you, what do you think the difference is between 8 and 78?"

"I read on the Internet that at the age of 8, you take her to bed and tell her a story."

"At 18...?"

"You tell her a story and take her to bed."

"28...?"

"You don't need to tell her a story to take her to bed."

"At 38...?"

"She tells you a story and takes you to bed."

"48...?"

"She tells you a story to avoid going to bed."

"What about at 58...?"

"You stay in bed to avoid her story."

"At 68...?"

"If you take her to bed, that'll be a story!"

"And at 78, both the bed and the woman are dead and buried?"

"Exactly! What story? What bed? Who the hell are you?"

Listening and dancing to Mimboland's rich and fascinating music on social virtues (love, honesty, hard work, etc.), social ills (jealousy, corruption, prostitution, etc.) and power relations between men and woman and at various levels of society, Lilly Loveless reached an instant decision. She'd have to look into how these themes are captured in popular music, and would recruit a research assistant to collect and transcribe relevant popular songs for her.

She submitted herself to the music, and to the Mimbolander sense of spectacle. The large mirrors on the walls produced and reproduced images of her, Bobinga Iroko and others locked in ecstasy.

"Listening to Petit Pays," said a young girl in her teens, probably, "makes me feel all charged up."

Lilly Loveless could say the same, for the music was indeed luring and electrifying in its suggestiveness.

The pleasures were profound, beyond words.

The night was long and consumed by excitement.

There were mixed fillings of drinks, but no mixed feelings.

The enjoyment was total.

There was kissing... with Bobinga Iroko... much kissing.

"One needs to be kissingly close to notice that you are yet to have your wisdom tooth," Lilly Loveless whispered.

"And one needs that experience to know just what an excellent kisser you are," replied Bobinga Iroko, blissfully.

Well before the time the sun kissed Mount Mimbo good morning with its baby rays, the buyam-sellams, bus drivers, taxi men, bendskin riders, truck pushers, travellers and other early risers in Puttkamerstown could see Bobinga Iroko's Toyota Hilux stagger into town as if it had refilled at the bar, not the filling station. They looked in wonderment at the excited car exciting everything along its way.

Britney quickly thumbed at the keys of her cell phone in response to a text message she had just received: 'University closed down due to student riot, till God knows when. Problems with fence VC is building. More later. Love you.'

She was eager to impress Lilly Loveless who was raiding the magnificent Puttkamerstown Botanical Gardens with her digital camera, repeatedly whispering 'tropical paradise' with almost every shot she took. Finally satisfied she had captured every plant and flower that caught her fancy, including several shots from varied positions of the thorny imposing 'lover's tree' at the centre of the Gardens, Lilly Loveless joined Britney on the bench where the latter was sitting, hungry to start.

"My ears have been filled. Ready for me to fill yours?" asked Britney. Lilly Loveless smiled in anticipation of what Britney had gathered since their last meeting over a week ago.

Although Lilly Loveless woke late after the night of dancing, musical and self exploration with Bobinga Iroko, she had made sure she stopped by a shop for cold juice, water and biscuits, which she brought along in an environmentally friendly plastic bag.

Britney was sitting beneath two flamboyant trees that met overhead, listening to the musical concert of a multitude of colourful birds in the trees. She sat with her beaded purse on her lap, her notebook grasped in her hands and her knees turned in, ready to share. Lilly Loveless simultaneously appreciated the morning breeze and noticed Britney's flower print dress, sleeveless and tight fitting on top then flowing to her ankles as she sat. Did their meeting place influence Britney's choice of attire or was it a complete coincidence? Lilly Loveless wondered.

Britney waited patiently for Lilly Loveless to open two bottles of juice, ready her recorder and open her notebook. When she could tell Lilly Loveless was all ears, she began.

"Let me start with two letters I collected from a classmate of mine on my way here, who, frustrated by a recent experience with a married man in Sawang, does not have a kind word to say about men right now," began Britney.

"Go right ahead," said Lilly Loveless.

* * *

"The girl is called Veronique, She writes: 'Good morning Darling, How are you doing? And your business? I hope you find time to rest a bit. My Darling, I miss you terribly, I think of you every day. I'm already quite embarrassed passing at the telephone booth every time to find out if you have called, only to be told no message.

"I really used to love it when we saw each other regularly, when you used to tell me your beautiful stories. Even more, I used to adore your smile and especially your beautiful lips that made me always want to kiss you everywhere. Darling, I feel good with you. By your side, I momentarily forget about everyone surrounding us. You therefore can imagine how much pain your absence is causing me. You see, you promised to let me know whenever

you were in town. But, since we last saw each other, something has changed. You could even call me from Sawang, just to let me know you are also thinking of me. In any case, you could call just to say good morning or good evening, and insist that the message be transmitted to me.

"All I wish is for us to see again and to be as we were before. If you've misplaced my telephone number, this is 77980674. Or you could leave a letter for me at the university. Do something, I would like to hear your voice or read your letter.

"Once more, I miss you terribly, I've borne too much and I suffer from your absence. Darling, remember one thing, I don't want to lose you so soon, you've left your mark on me, I have a good impression of you; because every time we talked, you always came down to my level. Thus the chemistry was good between us. Let me leave you, and I think we've still got a long road to travel together. Till soon, I kiss you. Bye."

"She sounds sweet, but seems rather old fashioned, or is it her lover who doesn't know how to send an email?" remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Perhaps the man didn't give her an email address, or prefers letters that take time to compose and that are well thought out, to the easy and shabby emails people click to and fro without as much as reading over for spelling, grammar and structure."

"Sorry, I didn't think of that. Please continue."

"In the second, she is even more desperate," Britney went on: "Darling, I write to you one more time to remind you that I am alive. This is the second time I am writing to you and twice I have called to leave a message for you. I'm already tired, don't you think? Do you remember what you told me one day that I couldn't alone decide to end our relationship, as this was a matter for the two of us to decide? You would realise with me that you have done what you said I should never do. I would like you to keep your word. What I want now is for you to call me for a meeting. Let's meet face to face, so you tell me that it is all over, that you've already found another girl, a girl better than me. Don't you see that you would have freed me and perhaps you would have rendered me a great service? I also believe that it is important to be clear in life. To tell you the truth, you are making me do what I vowed never to do. To tell the truth, I'm ashamed of myself. I count on your understanding. I would like you to telephone in the evening, around six o'clock every day at the téléboutique where my sister works; as she would already be there, she assumes duty at this time every day except Fridays and Sundays. If you have forgotten the number, it is 77980674. Let me leave you, I count on you for the next meeting to say farewell the proper way."

"I notice that she doesn't even have a cell phone of her own. Isn't that odd?"

"New technology is a bit like Heaven," replied Britney.

"In what way?"

"Many are called but few are chosen."

"I like that."

"Thanks."

"Did she say how the guy reacted?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"That, I still have to find out," replied Britney. "She was not in a mood to be interviewed, so she sort of wanted to chase me away by sharing her letters with me."

"Do please follow up with her when she is in a better mood, as it seems you have quite some story to tell on this relationship," recommended Lilly Loveless. "And remember to find out why letters and *téléboutiques* in this day and age when the email and cell phone are widely available."

"I will," Britney promised, noting the recommendation in her notebook.

"In the second case, what starts with a little light fun can lead up roads you didn't imagine," she started.

"I'm all ears," said Lilly Loveless.

* * *

"Lionel, you see, is now 24 and a third year student here at Mimbo. In high school he dated Comfort, his classmate. At high school, junior students are called freshers. When school reopens in September, there is usually a rush by boys to pick up girl freshers, hence the name September Rush. No boy wants to be left out, for fear of being termed 'chickless guy' by peers. Lionel was thus lucky to have Comfort, whom he greatly admired and loved to show off amongst his friends and mates."

"Sounds promising," remarked Lilly Loveless, wetting her lips with some of the juice.

"Lionel had one thing in mind: how to convince Comfort to have sex with him as soon as possible. At school he would do everything, including visiting her room and staying late into the night, until Comfort would tell him to leave so she could sleep. One Friday night, he proposed an outing to a popular bar-cum-nightclub, where they stayed till 4am. Despite his efforts, he could only lay a kiss on her cheek. The next day he proposed going to a video projection hall with Comfort, where he managed to convince her to watch a pornographic film. His intentions were the same, to weaken her defences. He succeeded. As the film played, soon they were holding hands. Soon Comfort's head was on his shoulder. Soon she was pressing hard on his arm. She moved closer to him. He pretended he didn't know what was going on, but his body was telling its own story. When he spoke to her his voice was slower each time, taking longer pauses between sentences. He stared at her lips each time he spoke, oblivious of what exactly it was he was saying, or that the film was running. Without knowing it, he was getting closer and closer to Comfort. Slowly, he moved his eyes from Comfort's mouth to her eyes and back again. Then, he placed his hand on her hip and brought her closer. Their lips met.

"After the film, Lionel feigned saying good night, but Comfort almost burst into tears, wouldn't let him go and begged him to accompany her to her hostel which was off campus. Lionel went along, and spent the night with her. When he returned to his hostel the next day, his friends were teasing and hailing him at the same time: 'Lionel don nang mboko eh', 'he don take baptism', 'Pa you strong'...

"Then Lionel's relationship with Comfort intensified."

"How so?" asked Lilly Loveless as Britney paused to sip her juice.

"He spent most of his time with her. She would prepare food at times and visit him at his hostel, where they would eat and study together.

Lionel's feelings were centred on Comfort, and he saw no need to look at any other girl.

"On the other hand, little did he know she also had a relationship

with a business tycoon. When she left school and went to town to see her tycoon, she would lie to Lionel that she was going to see her parents. Things came into the open one day when on her 18th birthday a terrible thing happened."

"I hope nothing too serious," Lilly Loveless interjected.

"You'll find out if you let me continue."

"Please proceed," Lilly Loveless got the message.

"A party was organised in a bar owned by one of the discipline masters of the high school. The party took off at 4pm. There was the cutting of the cake, wishes by friends, and then dancing. The MC was a friend of Comfort, and had drawn up a list of who was to open the floor with whom. Naturally, Lionel was slated to have the opening dance with Comfort.

"What they didn't know was that Comfort had invited what came to be known as her 'illiterate business tycoon' as well. As the couples went to the floor as programmed, there the tycoon walked in and saw his bloomy Comfort dancing with Lionel; and he was not amused. He stormed his way towards them, pushed Comfort down and removed the shoes she was wearing. He had bought her the shoes and would not let her use them to please a mere student, a 'flying-shirt' with no pockets and no wallet. He was terribly disappointed in Comfort, whom he had already introduced to his fellow traders at the Zintgraffstown main market, where he was highly regarded for going out with a high school girl. A rumour later surfaced that a medicine man had given him the task of impregnating a virgin school girl if he wanted his business to grow."

"Such things happen?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"What do you expect of illiterate men like local market traders?" replied Britney. "If it is not a virgin school girl, it is the wife of your neighbour, your own daughter or even your mother, they ask you to sleep with. They ask for something impossible or very difficult, those fortune-tellers, and you have to be illiterate enough to believe them," she explained.

"So what happened in this case?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"The business tycoon probably withdrew to lick his wounds or look for another victim. But for Comfort, the disgrace was unbelievable. Everybody felt ashamed and confused. Lionel could not bear it, and gave Comfort a slap on the face. Their friends left. The following day, Lionel's stained name was splashed all over the gossip corners of the campus, including what the students, for reasons of their own, had come to term 'Radio Bagdad News,' the dreadful lampooning service that, like a precision guided missile, never missed an opportunity to make an inferno of life on campus. Comfort's reputation was heavily tarnished as well. Her name and story were posted on every street on campus and in the neighbourhood. Even the birds seemed to shame her with the music they made round the campus. Although her friends did their best to keep her company and reassured, she never felt free. She kept a low profile in school for weeks until the news reluctantly died down."

"Things must not have been easy for her," said Lilly Loveless.

"And it gets more complicated," continued Britney. "Too shocked by Comfort's behaviour, Lionel decided he would end the relationship. He was surprised a few days later by a note from her begging for pardon. She gave reasons for her infidelity: it was because he did not support her financially

and she was not very sure of him, given that there were boyfriend snatchers all around the high school. She promised to bury the past and to turn a new page with him.

"It took Lionel some time to consider her request, but after a while and with the active intervention of their friends they came back together and were on good terms. The relationship became very intense again, and this time, Comfort was showing her love through love letters and postcards.

"One postcard read: 'Thoughts for a best friend: One of the most special places in my heart will always be saved for you: the one person I can always talk to; the one person who understands; for making me laugh in the rain; for helping me shoulder my troubles; for loving me in spite of myself, and always putting me back on my feet again; for giving me someone to believe in; someone who lets me know that there really is goodness and kindness and laughter and love in the world; for being one of the best parts of my life, and proving it over and over again; for being so worthy of my love, for being my best friend.'

"Another read: 'Falling in love with u and loving u are the most wonderful things that happened to me. Let's never forget that a love like ours comes once in a lifetime. You are so loving and caring to me. No one else has ever made me feel as happy, as content, as complete, as full of smiles as you do. I love u forever.' There were many others: 'I love having you in my life: I love all the joy that being with you brings to me, from our most intimate moments alone, to the pride I feel in you when we're out somewhere together...'

"It was clear that she had turned a new chapter: 'Lionel Love, I wish you knew how I have longed for a day to tell you how much you mean to me, how much I've come to love you, and how it fills me with joy to know that we are birds of the same feathers. But I thank God because he made a wonderful and special day like this, for you and for me to say: You mean so much to me and above all, I LOVE YOU.'

"On his 20th birthday, she wrote: 'I love all that we share. I love the laughter, the understanding, and the fact that so much about us – our minds, our bodies, our hearts, our feelings – should touch so closely and perfectly together. I love how gentle you are and how sensitive, but most of all, I love the tenderness you save for me and me alone. I could never tell you how much that means to me. Happy Birthday, with love.'

"In a Christmas note to him, she declared: 'Lionel, you are an embodiment of God's perfect creature. I could never have wished for somebody better than you. I pray for you today and always to be merry and may you remain blessed.'

"The first year was over and they were both promoted to upper sixth. This time they reduced their leisure time. Though they attended all booms, they never visited the popular drinking and dancing spots as they did in lower sixth. Lionel remained the bright student that he was, and was rewarded with an appointment as class proctor. He performed his duty well and everybody loved him."

"Sounds like trouble," Lilly Loveless anticipated.

"Yep. Lionel was masculine and sporty – a very articulate footballer nicknamed Kling-Kong-Kong by admirers of his ball control. There was a soft side to him as well. He was intelligent, but he was also spontaneous, and his

sense of humour added to his charm. With this charm and his accomplishments he was popular, and his popularity attracted girls. There were always girls around him. One day he was tempted to date another girl called Mercy. The outcome was a merciless disaster, not because Comfort found out about the relationship, which she didn't, but because he contracted gonorrhoea. Even when he was taken to the hospital, Comfort ignorantly visited him, bringing food. She was lied to by Lionel that he was suffering from severe stomach ache.

"He got well and came back to school, promising never to forget the lesson he had learnt. Henceforth, he would trust no other girl but his Comfort. It was second term and book was beginning to be serious even amongst those who loved play more than they did their studies. Unfortunately Comfort became pregnant, and this affected Lionel seriously. They thought of an abortion, but he hadn't the money even to pay a traditional doctor, let alone to afford a D&C. He informed his friends and since they trusted and helped one another, they donated money. With the money Lionel went to see Comfort to agree to a solution. Comfort did not consent to his proposal to have an abortion. In fact, she felt insulted that Lionel should take a decision of that magnitude about her pregnancy without consulting her."

"Typical," whispered Lilly Loveless.

"Curiously, her refusal to abort made Lionel furious, almost to the point of beating her. Why men always spontaneously resort to such easy solutions, beats me. In his case, whatever changed his mind, he never knew. He just left without offering any other word, thinking that after sometime she may think about the proposal and send him a positive reply.

"A reply was not forthcoming. He sent his friends to talk to her but Comfort stood firm in her decision and would not let go of the pregnancy. Lionel was doubly disturbed. Many questions came up to his mind that he could not answer. How would he tell his parents he had impregnated a girl? How would he cope with all the rumour and finger-pointing that were going to circulate about him? And worst of all, how would he face Comfort's parents?"

"I see what you mean about things getting more complicated," volunteered Lilly Loveless.

"Quite surprisingly, Comfort was much calmer about the whole thing. She even tried to console Lionel, telling him not to worry. She told him she was going to inform her mother and assured him that wouldn't be a problem. He relaxed for a moment, but when she came back with the news that her mother wanted to see him, he was tormented once again. He summoned courage and went there. Her mother being an understanding woman, they made an agreement. Lionel had to inform his parents about it, so that necessary preparations would be made.

"Although completely jolted by the experience, Lionel managed to sit for his GCE exams, after which he left for Nyamandem where his parents lived. His mother was the first to notice a change in her son, but Lionel never gave away what actually was his problem. It was a friend who finally told his mother and father about the issue. They became furious, and his mother threw insults at him daily. At one time she said 'they send wonna say make wonna learn book wonna go learn na how for make pikin.'"

"That's a mouthful!" Lilly Loveless couldn't help interjecting. "But I understand, so my pidgin must be getting better by the day."

"As for his father," Britney ignored the interjection, "he told him the plans he had made for him had to change because he now had to use the money to prepare for his newborn. Unable to feel free in their home, Lionel disappeared for a year. While he was away, news reached him that Comfort had given birth to a baby girl and that they were both doing fine. Presently the child is with Lionel's parents and in primary 3. Lionel has lost contact with Comfort, who unfortunately never made her GCE. He, on the other hand, is a student right here at UM."

Britney tipped the bottle in her hand up to drink the last of the juice and asked "Have you ever had an abortion?"

Lilly Loveless was caught a bit off guard, shook her head slowly from side to side and said, "Nope, I haven't." And to change the subject, asked Britney if she wanted more juice or a bottle of water.

"Nope," she said, "let's get on with our work."

Lilly Loveless nodded.

* * *

With that green light Britney proceeded: "Rebecca is about 21 years of age and attending school at Standard Comprehensive College, Form Five. Her father is late and her mother is carrying on with petty-businesses, such as frying puff puff and beans for sale. Rebecca is the fourth child to her mother. She is already blessed with a fair complexion, Rebecca, which she herself has added to by polishing with bleaching creams. Though she finds herself being maltreated by the O Levels, she is determined to pursue schooling."

"What do you mean blessed with a fair complexion?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Here in Mimboland, lighter skin women are valued higher than darker skin ones."

"Whom by?"

"Men and women alike. In marriage for example, the bride price for those who are fair in complexion is usually higher, as these women tend to be more visible than some of us," Britney explained. "Perhaps it has to do with the fact that the electricity supply is very low and unstable, and when the lights are off as is often the case, lighter skin women are more visible than the dark skin women."

"So they are worth more for their capacity to attract attention in the dark?"

"Something like that," said Britney.

"How fascinating," said Lilly Loveless, nodding at the same time to say Britney could continue with her story.

"Rebecca's past experience in life has been full of ups and downs as concerns relationships with boys. She had her very first boyfriend when she was quite young. Before him, she was being approached by so many boys and she raised her shoulders high because she thought she was very beautiful. The fact of overplaying her beauty meant that boys were not comfortable once they finally had something to do with her. She discovered she had had four boyfriends within two years."

"Four boyfriends in two years?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Luckily for her," Britney continued, "she was being advised by her elder sister to stop messing around and spoiling the family name all over the place.

"Rebecca then decided to settle and to have one boyfriend. Richie was in Form Five but in a different school. His parents were rich: his father is a customs officer and his mother a civil servant, and he was hungry to make his circles see him as part of this wealth. Rebecca fell in love with Richie during one vacation. He invited her to their house under the pretext of giving her the address of one of her former boyfriends who was dismissed from school and had moved to Sawang. Richie welcomed her with cake biscuits and drinks. She was not all that used to him but they discussed each other superficially and the name of her former boyfriend only featured once. Rebecca promised to come back again after two days, to give Richie a letter to take to Sawang.

"Before the day she was to visit again, Richie went to the shop and bought a good pair of shoes for her."

"Girls sure seem to like shoes," noted Lilly Loveless. "Tell me though, a high school boy with money to buy a girl an expensive pair of shoes? It is difficult to imagine, especially given the images of Africa that are fed us, those of a continent crippled by poverty and by desire without affordability."

"Haven't you heard the saying that every crisis has its opportunists?" replied Britney. "Believe it or not, in major schools around major cities in the country, children are basically awash with more money than sense. They are wayward at school because of their economic might. Oh, they have nifty little cell phones, leading to some schools banning any kind of communication device which is not on the school list. This includes laptops, MP3s, CDs, VCDs, DVDs, flash sticks, etc. Calls are made at the school office or from other phones outside the school when children are allowed out if they are boarders. Some have cars either because parents have given them to compensate for their absence, or the cars are stolen from parents or guardians. The cars allow them to maintain girlfriends who are school children or even school leavers of the same age or older. Those who live alone have parties to die for on weekends, with booze, music, videos including porn and sex on the side. Maids paid for by parents to ease domestic chores may also be reigned in as girlfriends or sex partners. The kids are consumed by a fascination and fixation with designer clothes and shoes, original music and videos of trendy world class singers. The girls all want to look like Barbie doll, and believe that nothing larger than size zero is fashionable, but junk food and an easy life are making the realization of this dream size impossible for most of them. Too much lunch money for school or general discretionary spending means that they just can't eat their cake and have it. Failure to slim down in reality is compensated for by a taste for luxury through trendy outfits, boutique shoes, jewellery and perfumes imported from Muzunguland, and not from China whose products they consider too cheap and too inferior to be of interest."

Lilly Loveless was spellbound, and her notebook said so.

"Believe it or not," added Britney. "And it was a real surprise when Rebecca was presented with the shoes. Instead of the words 'I don't take presents from boys I hardly know', she thanked Richie for being more than kind. Little did she know he was building an intention of having her. This he made known to his friends, but to Rebecca he gave the impression his gift was obligation free.

"Rebecca was a strong chick who had given 'tête' to many boys trying to associate with her. Through repeated visits paid by Rebecca to Richie's house, things finally changed into a love relationship. Jeff, her former boyfriend who had moved to Sawang, soon became forgotten. Now she thought of the fact that she had seen in Richie a new guy who could buy her 'boutique shoes' which at the time were not common. She gave the impression of not being aware that Richie could quite simply want to take advantage of her nose for material things.

"Their kind of relationship was that which was known all over the place. Richie was a student and had peers who liked to show off, such that when they went to the nightclub they bought beer, whisky, and chicken so that their table showed that they had money. He bought Rebecca expensive track suits, shoes, dresses..., and more of the same, again and again."

"I smell trouble like burnt cooking," Lilly Loveless insisted.

"Be patient," Britney rebuked, gently. "They went out together for lunch, picnics, shopping and nightclubbing. Not once did she stop to ask where Richie, a simple student without a job, got the money to lavish on her."

"Is it normal for girls to ask?"

"Shouldn't a well brought up girl ask?"

"I suppose she should, but do they?"

"The fact that Rebecca didn't doesn't mean they don't."

"I give up," smiled Lilly Loveless.

"Rebecca's misinterpretation of dating led her into a gutter big time," Britney went on. "She became pregnant and it was the worst time in her life. She had been despising her mother, not helping her, sleeping out for weeks and absenting herself from school because she had to satisfy the wants of her guy. So she did not know how to go about the pregnancy."

Lilly Loveless looked perplexed. "Britney, don't people use condoms?!"

"Not as much as you would think, especially with the risks of getting HIV. With the excuse that you cannot enjoy a bath with a raincoat on, or eat a sweet in its wrapping, some go to the extent of perforating their condoms, if they bother to wear them at all. Others start off with condoms and then abandon them into the relationship claiming familiarity - 'I know you, you know me now, no?' In some instances, the condom simply comes under too much pressure and explodes. And the consequences are frightening. A high school student who died recently was discovered to have kept a diary with 87 cases of girls he had infected with AIDS. A male university student diagnosed with AIDS had the audacity to tell the doctor: 'I got this thing from the University of Mimbo, and I will take it back there. They will see red.' Not to mention a highly placed customs officer in Sawang who uses the sumptuous bribes he receives daily to lure unsuspecting beauties to his lair, where he injects them with the most lethal strand of HIV known to exist, thanks to his frequent flyer status." Britney was bitter. "If you investigate further, these are probably guys who had a chance to make a difference from the outset. Stories abound of girls who take a condom from their purse and ask a man to push it on only for the man to push it away saying: 'You don't expect me to eat banana without taking off the skin, do you? I'm not a pig, mind you.'"

"And the authorities do nothing to curb such irresponsible behaviour?" Lilly Loveless was scandalised.

"Mimboland na Mimboland," said Britney.

Lilly Loveless nodded: It said it all.

"Anyway," Britney continued, "Rebecca's pregnancy was about three months old and she had not yet informed Richie. One day she gathered courage and told him and they decided to do a D&C, so she could once more be stable and could go about her daily activities and enjoying life unencumbered."

"Interesting," said Lilly Loveless, more to herself than to Britney. "In Comfort's case abortion vehemently rejected, but readily accepted in Rebecca's case. What accounts for these different attitudes?" She spoke out as she wrote in her notebook.

Noticing that the question was not addressed to her, Britney continued with her story. "Rebecca was faithful in her relationship, but Richie was not. He went out with a girl in their school called Annette. During his 17th birthday party there was a quarrel and a fight. Rebecca could not bear seeing him cheat on her because she had a jealous mind. She never wanted him to talk to any girl. So she was totally devastated when she realised that he had something to do with Annette. Rebecca could not feel free because she was not a 'bed sharer' with any other girl. She had become so close to Richie that her school life was affected. She loved him and always wanted him to be near her. And when he was good he was really good. At times, he went to Sawang and brought his father's car and took her together with her friends to the beach. Rebecca did not believe there could be anyone more than Richie ever.

"They were both at school, but Richie was better able to combine what they did with studies, while Rebecca repeatedly failed her exams. The more time she spent away from class, the greater she failed. Richie would take her to all the nightclubs around, enjoy life, and yet pass his exams when he sat them. For Rebecca the story would be failure, however hard she tried to make up. Studying for exams was like the 'callé callé' of her life, and some of her friends would laugh at her behind her back by saying things such as: 'Who needs brains when you've got tits?'

"So you can imagine how she felt when she failed the GCE and Richie passed. He organised a party but she did not bother attending.

"Things got worse when she discovered that she was pregnant yet again. She had a light fever and was vomiting. So she went for a pregnancy test. The results of which were positive. But she was not having things her way this time. Richie, her 'jackpot,' did not have money to afford her another D&C. He tried to play games with his parents in the hope of getting some money, to no avail. His aunt later got wind of the pregnancy, called for Rebecca and told her not to do away with the child. With no money forthcoming, Rebecca reported the matter to her uncle who was the assistant commissioner of police, and Richie was locked up."

"Locked up?!" interrupted Lilly Loveless, looking up from her notebook.

"Yep, behind bars. News reached his parents and they were very angry because they petted him so much. At last Richie was released and a hundred and fifty thousand Mim dollars were given to Rebecca to start preparations for delivery. Instead Rebecca took the money and bought 'boutique shoes', expensive clothes and used the rest to visit a traditional

doctor for concoctions to do away with the pregnancy. There was no mistaking or compromising her priorities. Yet the foetus refused to cooperate. It did not come out. She pretended to be attending antenatal classes after this failed attempt.

"After about six months and two weeks of pregnancy, she fell ill and was taken to hospital where she miscarried. Then it was discovered that she had administered some concoctions which affected the baby."

Lilly Loveless pointed to a colourful butterfly that had just landed on Britney's knee, now crossed over the other. Superstitious, Britney shooed it away and continued.

"Rebecca's and Richie's names were headline news in local newspapers, including *The Talking Drum*. Then she was forced to change colleges, because she could not bear the way friends and others in the community would burn her with their eyes.

"Distance and problems have made the relationship between Richie and Rebecca drift apart and peter out. She is still struggling to pass her O Level GCE, but she refuses to give up on the 'high classes which Richie brought out in her."

Lilly Loveless lifted her head and took in the variety of flowers around them. There was a lone student or couple that wandered by from time to time on one of the crisscrossing paths through the gardens. Lilly Loveless wondered about their stories, and resolved to dig up as much as possible from the stacks of newspapers and magazines in the Archives, with the assistance of Prince Anointed. A strange thought crossed her mind: What would a married woman do with flowers offered her by a secret lover at a secret meeting place like this? Take them home? No way! Dump them somewhere in the nearby bushes? More like it. She smiled. Marriage and formal relationships do take their toll on a woman's freedom to express and explore her sexuality and happiness, don't they? This was not the time to ask Britney for an opinion, but she would have to one of these days, as it was part of her work to understand the cultural dimensions of sex, power and consumerism in Mimboland.

As she prepared to ask Britney if she knew the name of one of the particularly beautiful orange flowers, Britney started sharing her third interview. She continued to fill the ears of Lilly Loveless who in turn filled her notebook, as butterflies celebrated their presence in the company of the singing birds in the trees.

Lulu was as pretty as the hair she made. Her salon – Lulu Coiffure – was the most popular in the whole of Puttkamerstown. The words ‘A Woman’s Hair Is Her Crowning Glory’ were boldly inscribed on a beautiful signboard of a lovely variety of hairdos eloquently captured by the artist who designed it.

It was to Lulu that Britney sent Lilly Loveless when the latter decided she needed to revamp her looks by braiding her hair.

Lulu was as artful a braider as she was with other hairdos. She insisted in handling Lilly Loveless herself, while her three apprentices attended to other clients. Lilly Loveless took pleasure in knowing her curls would soon be transformed into lovely braids. She watched cars, motorbikes or bendskins, bicycles and people on foot headed to and from the market pass by in front of the open salon door. And she checked Lulu’s progress occasionally in the mirror.

“Is it to keep the humidity off your equipment?” she asked, indicating the metal box where Lulu kept her combs and scissors.

“Na for steriliz-am, whiteman-woman. Man no di know,” replied Lulu assuredly.

Lilly Loveless’s pidgin was not the best despite the intensive lessons she continued to take, but she understood what Lulu said, although she couldn’t figure out why Lulu kept calling her ‘whiteman-woman’, as if she didn’t know her name or felt that a white woman needs a man to be visible. She refused to make an issue of it, but made a mental note in the interest of her research. She noticed the electrical cord hanging from the box, in a dusty loop against the wall.

“A sterilizer that needs to be plugged in just a couple of times a year,” she said, half question, half trying to convince herself, nodding her head saying, “I see.”

“Wheti you see?”

Lilly Loveless ignored the question by asking her own. “What do women say is the reason why they come to do their hair?”

“Foseeka I be the best for Puttkamerstown.”

“I know you are the best. But what other reasons bring them here?”

“They fit congosai for here as they like, no one day I go open my mop tell some man.”

“I mean, why do women do their hair?”

“Dat you question foolish plenty. Why you di chop?”

After making Lilly Loveless look stupid, Lulu proceeded to tell her that although some silly men believe that women do their hair in order to be “like a web to trap every male heart”, the simple truth is that “a woman’s beauty lies in her hair”, and women are beautiful first and foremost for themselves and for fellow women. If a woman spends half of her time in front of a mirror or at the hairdresser’s to do her hair, no man but her deserves to take the credit for that. Lulu was adamant. Hair engineers like her are there to accentuate a woman’s beauty with magical results, make her feel good within herself and to other women, and if this flatters men in the process, it is most certainly by accident, and not cause for celebration. Their duty is and remains

to make women feel confident and beautiful for their own pleasure and to take pride in their outward appearance. Until men start seeing with the eyes of their hearts and feeling with their minds, would they understand that the world is larger and richer than that which their manhood is able to erect? Doing hair, to women, is really more about being comfortable, not about being sexy. She then told Lilly Loveless why Mimbo women like long hair. She said long hair adds beauty. For Mimbo women who cannot have very long hair like that of Muzungu women, and who admire very long hair, the alternative is to turn to artificial hair to meet this desire. As a hairdresser, it is her duty to advise her clients that some 'beautiful' styles can only be possible with long or thick hair, and to encourage women with short or sparse hair to go for artificial hair, which helps in giving them the hair style they want.

"What causes short or scanty hair?" Lilly Loveless asked.

Lulu explained that sparsely populated hair could be genetic, but it could also result from constant application of chemical products damaging to the hair roots. Again, very cold weather causes hair breakage, and makes the hair fall off. These mishaps make women very uneasy with their hair.

Satisfied with what she saw in the mirror, Lilly Loveless extended a few Mim dollars to Lulu, thanked her, and stopped a taxi for the Archives where Britney was waiting for her. Seated in the back on the passenger side she felt her derriere absorbing something that smelt fishy. She glided to the other side behind the driver to avoid the moisture and figured that her brown print tunic over brown jeans wouldn't reveal whatever stains she may have picked up. That was what you got when taxis, for a few more Mim dollars, were indiscriminate between butchers transporting freshly slaughtered beef and normal passengers. She dismissed the thought that the wetness might just have come from a woman surprised by her period. She arrived at the Archives just after 11.00 am.

"Lovely Lilly," exclaimed Prince Anointed when he saw her, "What lovely long braids you've got there! You look like an African princess." He laughed his last laugh with his missing front teeth, as he had an appointment with a dentist shortly after, the first in 30 years, thanks to the generous gift of Mim\$200,000 by Lilly Loveless.

Lilly Loveless could see Prince Anointed had an observant eye. She felt good with his compliment.

Overhearing the animated discussions, Britney closed her notebook and headed for the entrance to the Archives. She had promised to take Lilly Loveless to a nearby bar where they could work undisturbed for an hour or two and get some grilled chicken for lunch.

Britney returned the documents she was consulting to Prince Anointed, asking him to keep them for her until the following Saturday while Lilly Loveless walked off with the documents he had gathered for her, promising to return them after she had photocopied pertinent pages.

The bar was actually in the courtyard of a two storey building where several families seemed to live side by side businesses. You wouldn't even notice it walking by on the street, but as soon as you entered, to access the courtyard in the back, you had to pass through a passageway lined with crates of empty bottles. It wasn't yet lunchtime and the twenty or so tables were empty, except for two early morning drinkers at separate tables who looked as if they'd spent the night refusing to let go of the muse in the bottle.

Britney and Lilly Loveless settled in a shady spot against one wall and ordered their usual drinks. Britney, as always, was anxious to begin.

* * *

"As I said before, some of these matters are discreet," she commenced, "and others less so or only for a while. Kenneth and Judith were seeing each other around, but they finally met one evening when they were both at the same nightclub and Kenneth was really determined to start something. He was still a stranger to Judith, although she knew she had seen him around. He talked to her. She was very reluctant, because nothing about him at first impression and first sight clicked. He pleaded for a rendezvous, which was rejected. Eventually she walked off."

"So, what did he do next?" queried Lilly Loveless.

"Well, isn't there always the desire to hope? Kenneth went further to make a gesture. He went back to his car and in an envelope he put in new banknotes of fifty thousand Mim dollars with his complimentary card which said he was a customs inspector. Judith received her envelope and simply smiled, 'What does he think?'

"Days passed and passed. Kenneth waited and waited. One fortunate day, if I might say so, since it was unfortunate for his wife, Judith called Kenneth at his office. What pleasure! And that was the beginning of what no one could understand. Not even them. Immediately Kenneth left to join Judith who was resident in another town. This turned out to be a daily routine for him."

"You said Kenneth was married, right?" asked Lilly Loveless as she flicked a fly from her Mimbo-Wanda.

"Yes, but we must grant him this: Kenneth never stopped being a 'responsible' father. He did every necessary thing as a husband and father, as money was not his problem, given that he received bribe left and right. Yet he never failed to see his loving mistress. They spent time together having lunch and visiting nightclubs. The money was there and he constantly dished it out. How sweet and nice of him."

"Or rather, of those who gave him bribes, to be more exact," Lilly Loveless interjected.

"Gradually it became more serious," said Britney, ignoring her. "They both started spending nights together. Thus Kenneth was not home from time to time. Why not for a few days? How dare Mrs Kenneth question. Finally, Mrs Kenneth came to understand. But what could she do? She simply watched, unable to do much. She did complain to elders, but he did everything possible to stop her from giving certain hints to particular people. It got to a situation where he was constantly out of town. Just to meet Judith. To be fair to Kenneth though, this affair never brought an end to pleasant times and trips he and his wife had shared before he met Judith. So he did manage both women pretty well, to a point. But how can a wife forgive or forget that what should normally be wholly hers is being poached by another woman?"

"You tell me," said Lilly Loveless.

"The affair got to an extent where his wife ignored all what was happening."

"Amazing woman," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"On one occasion after all his wife's spies informed her of recent developments, she simply ordered him to withdraw his new purchases from his girlfriend's apartment. He actually went and collected and presented them to his wife. Notwithstanding, the affair continued. Judith seemed satisfied with being the 'Madame Numero Deux' whenever Kenneth's wife was not around.

"As things go, Judith had a boyfriend as well, a fellow student, - flying-shirt, as you know we call them."

"No pockets, no wallet?"

"You're learning, Lilly," Britney smiled like a good teacher. "The boy came to visit her from time to time. The truth is, he knew of Kenneth and his filthy riches, but never knew it was that serious. Judith was panicky since she did not know how to handle the situation. There was no way she could get off if she slipped away for two weeks with her flying-shirt. Kenneth could go around from town to town and it was sure he would find her and beat her. That beating again - seems the only language men instinctively know. She did not know how to tell her flying-shirt she had to be off for two weeks. This would have meant death. On many occasions the flying-shirt had gone to friends' places and said 'I am looking for Kenneth, Judith's boyfriend.' On several occasions he had questioned her:

'Do you think you can spend your life with him?'

'No.'

'Why continue to be involved?'

'I'm afraid I cannot call it off. He could kill me.'

'Your studies are suffering. Have you realised that?'

'I will change and get serious.'

"She later on tells her friend that her student boyfriend will be going but she has no idea of how to do it:

'Do you think the other one is the one you really need?'

'Yes, we will grow together.'

'Then take a firm stand and do it.'

"This was easier said than done. With Kenneth around, she did succeed in taking leave of her flying-shirt. She did it so well that Kenneth could not believe his disappearance. But things eventually rang a bell, which made him start drifting. He stopped his search. From then on words, messages, phone calls came to a halt.

"Just when she feels her life has changed and is more stable, Kenneth begins to solidify his marriage. Soon, it is Mrs Kenneth who matters. One of those cases where the guy lights the fire and when she finally desires to hope for more, he moves on."

"What do you think could have happened to turn the tables on Judith in this way?"

"Perhaps Mrs Kenneth visited a marabout who gave her a charm to reconquer her man."

"Do those charms work?" Lilly Loveless was incredulous.

"You ignore them at your peril," said Britney. "If you don't go for them as a married woman, those chasing after your husband will, and his love for you will evaporate before your very eyes."

Lilly Loveless didn't know what to make of these affirmations by Britney, but decided not to pursue the matter.

The waitress brought another round of drinks thinking that it was the first time she'd seen gossips like them taking notes. Then again, you can never tell about those people from Muzunguland and their bizarre interests.

* * *

"Another affair began," continued Britney, as she checked the time on the cell phone grasped tightly in her hand, "after Mr Richard rendered a service to Mrs Gilbert, when they met by chance at the hospital where they were both visiting patients. At first, they were simply friends of the 'hi' and 'hello' type:

'How are you doing today?'

'I am OK but having a tiring day.'

'What of the patient?'

'He has improved a great deal. Thanks for the concern.'

"They did visit each other. It grew to extend to family visits, gradually integrating both families, sort of."

"Then...?" Lilly Loveless was too eager.

"With the blink of an eye, it turned to something else. Phone calls, which were directed either to his office or to his private personal cell phone. Sometimes they had private dates. No one knew of this as of yet. But there are always astute and very observant experts with extra alert eyes who can discern the most hidden of affairs just by taking one look at you. Mrs Gilbert was still to digest this and come out with the truth. They were both civil servants. Mr Richard made it a duty to report to Mrs Gilbert's residence after a tedious day. He sometimes frequented the house three times or more a day, and soon, it became the talk among close friends and neighbours who began jazzing about his frequent visits to her house. Most of them were not impressed with the attitude. They did their very best to advise both parties."

"And how did they react?"

"The more people talked the more the couple appeared not to care. They intensified their bond instead. Not afraid of any confrontation they carried on their daily activities as if no other person had a say. They eventually launched a common economic initiative together. This involved breeding birds and selling them. They made contacts with enterprises of which they became suppliers. And they appeared to live a good life despite the prying and critical eye of the public."

"That was courageous of them," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, but where there is merriment, problems do arise. Once in a while, they got problems which made them vibrate. Mrs Gilbert would get so upset and send him off. 'Take the door, I say. Leave my house before I hurt you.' After a few days there is room for reconciliation. You never know what takes place. You only notice Mr Richard's absence and likewise his reappearance. Their life continues normally, as normal as can be in such a situation. He visits when due or on demand."

"In and out he goes," volunteered Lilly Loveless slyly.

"You're right. But at home," continued Britney, "I have no idea of what happens. No one informs me of that. Mr Richard's brothers still visit her home. Of late I was told it has become a family affair. In Mr Richard's home village, his mother encourages him as she welcomes and entertains them. She is impressed about this new acquaintance. It has become a duty of always

giving them treats. She is less concerned about Mr Richard's wife at home."

"Is she not the right type?"

"I was not told. Whenever Mr Richard is invited for lunch, Mrs Gilbert enters the kitchen to produce a delicious and delicate meal. 'How lovely,' he would say, eating to his fill. 'I am overfed.' He would spend sometime before taking off. At times he would be rushing off to work or home, hopefully, because, despite everything, his wife is his wife. He also has his own children who are contented with his presence."

"What do you mean?"

"It was Mr Richard's duty to see that everything was under control in cases of Mrs Gilbert's absence from her home. He did make his rounds each day purposely to make sure all was OK, and to be able to report back when asked. Likewise, he did even have instructions for the children. This idea the kids greatly resented. But they could not do otherwise. He had total control until her return, when he would let her run her home. And at his own home, never have I heard of his wife over reacting. All she does is only to do her job, care for her children and look after her husband whenever he comes home. But she has discontinued her friendship with Mrs Gilbert."

"Well," Lilly Loveless looked up and waved away the flies around her drink, "with a friend like that, who needs an enemy?" They both laughed. Britney readjusted herself on her chair and continued unfolding the affair between Mr Richard and Mrs Gilbert.

"Unfortunately, the distance between towns did not strain the relationship, thanks to modern technologies of telephones and cars. Within hours everything is normal. They made sacrifices to pay each other visits. It was clear in everyone's mind that when Mr Richard goes out of town he heads for Nyamandem to visit Mrs Gilbert. At a certain point in time, Mrs Gilbert's parents questioned what she was up to. And her father asked: 'Why don't you marry him?' She just did not think of that. Anyway he kept insisting that they marry instead of maintaining an affair for so long."

"I don't think marriage is necessarily a solution," said Lilly Loveless. "For all you know, both could have been running away from the reality of marriage."

"We are not speculating, are we?" replied Britney. "I'm just telling you things as they are, what I gathered from the interviews."

"I'm sorry," Lilly Loveless apologised. "You are right. Science is not speculation, and I should know better, but what I meant was perhaps next time you should push further, to ask why, why, why all the time."

"And why not, I suppose," Britney agreed.

Lilly Loveless nodded. "And why is Mr Gilbert not in the picture, if I may ask?"

"I thought I said he was imprisoned for 40 years for embezzlement, didn't I?"

"No you didn't."

"I'm sorry. He used to be deputy head of a big state corporation, and stole too much for the government not to notice."

"I see," said Lilly Loveless. "And he obviously didn't invest much in his own family for Mrs Gilbert to survive on in his absence?" Lilly Loveless sounded sceptical.

"Everything he owned was seized when he was indicted, all his

businesses and property. Only the house in which Mrs Gilbert and the children lived was spared, because it was the one thing he graciously registered in her name."

"How sad!"

Britney continued: "Mr Richard plays an important part in her life. He is always there to give a helping hand. Even in times of pain he is there for comfort."

"And Mrs Richard, taking it all in her stride?"

"By the time Mrs Richard began to take action, every hope was blocked. Her marriage was at stake. She was fighting for her stability. She had lost her usual self. However, she has recovered considerably. Today, she is good looking, earns a salary, owns a house and car and takes care of everything. She is a success no matter the mess. How I admire her self sufficiency. She is graceful, even though Mrs Gilbert's relationship with her husband still continues, and has done so for 11 years. Once in a while she comes closest to taking her own life, but always succeeds in turning back some how. She is a woman to admire, I believe."

Lilly Loveless was surprised to see Britney wiping a tear from her eye with the back of her hand when she looked up from her notebook.

"A quick last story," said Britney.

Lilly nodded and added: "If you want."

* * *

"I know of a couple who have been married for 20 years, but whose sex life has ground to a halt because the wife can no longer stand to have sex with him. The husband used to present himself as the epitome of moral integrity, making out as if adultery was an abomination, only for her to find out that he had been deceiving her all along. He had, without her knowing, developed and sustained for years an extended appetite for coming with other women.

"I have overheard this woman at the Lulu Salon saying: 'Before I decided I had had enough, my husband was so predictably boring. No idea of foreplay. When he wanted it, all he did was throw himself at me, desperate for one thing only. It didn't matter whether I was in the kitchen cooking, on my knees saying my evening prayers, or in bed deep asleep. He is passionate about instant sex, and doesn't care what I think or feel, so long as he sticks something somewhere. And now that I have found someone interesting, loving and tender making me happy by doing what he has never done in ways he has hardly ever imagined, he goes around complaining that I am ignoring him in favour of a boy young enough to be my grandson. It's jealousy, pure jealousy. When he took me for granted and treated me like an old layer, he thought going out with younger flesh is his prerogative. Now that I am giving him a taste of his own medicine, suddenly he knows what it feels like not to be desired and respected...' I'll come back to this story another day, because it is too long for now," Britney glanced at her watch and changed her mind.

"No problem. There is no need to rush things," Lilly Loveless reassured.

"But I have a quickie for you..." said Britney.

"Really?" Lilly Loveless smiled broadly.

"The other day I met a woman I know complaining to another at the Lulu Salon where I went to retouch my hair. If I may add, Lulu is where to go if you want to hear the latest gossip in town by women."

"I guess so," said Lilly Loveless. "And it would appear Lulu herself is very discrete."

"She is and has to be. Her business requires that," Britney confirmed.

"Is that where you get most of your stories?" Lilly Loveless eyed her, bringing back to mind her own visit to Lulu.

"What do you take me for? Would a good researcher risk relying heavily on a single source?"

"No, not at all."

"Then why ask?"

"Joke, just a joke, sorry," Lilly Loveless felt her back against the wall.

"Weird joke," said Britney and continued the story. "The woman told this other woman how each time her husband would, before leaving for a prolonged and often disloyal stay abroad, insist on getting her pregnant. The husband would say he would be more comfortable that way because nobody would look at his pregnant wife in his absence. 'Can you imagine that? I told him I would divorce him if he tried that, just joking. But I am definitely not taking in.' When she said she wasn't going to take in any longer, her husband left, feeling rather sad that he did not succeed in getting her pregnant. 'I was made to realise that it is his mother's wish. We Africans, we have a long way to go: to think that somebody as educated as my husband, a whole world renowned pan-African historian, could succumb to such a stupid act, tells you why Africa shall never see the light of day under the leadership of its male species. The fear that men may find me attractive is supposed to be my concern, I'm not a teenager. Being able to withstand the temptation is all that counts. Being married does not mean that we don't come across people that we really like.' She was embittered the day she discovered that her frequent flyer husband was always taking his girlfriends along with him on his prolonged trips abroad, while keeping her grounded with pregnancies in the name of jealousy. She has since told him how good for nothing he is."

"With what consequences?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"She said they have decided to save the marriage because of the children. In their bed is a huge mountain in the middle, with each person in full knowledge of what portion of the bed belongs to whom. They've told the children that their staying together is only for their sake. And the children cherish this reality, as they are able to play ping pong with their warring parents. The arrangement has opened up a whole new world for her. One day in the university where she studies, a lecturer of hers said: 'In Africa where divorce is not looked upon kindly, only adultery saves marriages.' That same day something developed between her and her classmate. Since then she has had one affair after another, and even when she is out of one, she doesn't think of reconciliation with her husband who is equally jumping from affair to affair."

"The affaired couple," said Lilly Loveless. "We could come back to your quickie much later, if I feel the need," she told Britney, and made a note of this in her notebook: 'Quickie by Britney - unfinished business.'

"No problem. I could gather additional details in the meantime, to better prepare myself."

The waiter arrived just then with a platter of grilled chicken and two plates, but Britney explained she had to get to the bus station for Sawang where she had an appointment, so Lilly Loveless asked that the chicken be wrapped in two separate packages. Britney insisted on lots of chilli pepper to go with her package.

Lilly Loveless had never seen anything like it. She exclaimed to Britney, "Look how the sun's morning rays are turning the sand bright black."

Britney and Lilly Loveless had spent the night with an aunt of Britney's whose husband worked with the Mimboland Development Corporation head office in Sakersbeach. They had agreed to begin the day early so they could watch the beach come alive. In the morning, at 5 am, Britney and Lilly Loveless were compelled to join the rest of the family in morning prayers. Britney's aunt and her husband, who had serious problems with his boss at the office, made them recite over and over again with the family this passage from Proverbs 29:12-13: 'If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked. The poor man and the oppressor have this in common, the Lord gives sight to the eyes of both. If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure.'

That was their breakfast, their early morning prayer. Lilly Loveless and Britney left shortly after, and were indeed the first to arrive at the beach and spread their towels side by side to start the day with liquid pleasures in the company of the sea. Lilly Loveless attached her curls at the back of her head while Britney let her long braids go free. Though it was chilly and even a bit misty still, they smeared themselves with sunscreen, Britney mostly out of curiosity. Lilly Loveless readied her recorder, hoping it would be safe from impetuous grains of sand.

Britney started: "I know we talked about going beyond sketchy stories, but sometimes you can't get more."

"It's ok," replied Lilly Loveless, "let's hear what you have."

* * *

"Magnus, he is a flying-shirt at the University of Mimbo, in his last year, and he's reading Life Sciences. He says he went out with a girl whom he fell in love with when he was in upper sixth. Before he started dating Bébé, as the girl was fondly called, there was another flying-shirt dating her. As Bébé was dancing to his tune he continued to date her. In the long run, she forgot about the boyfriend she had when she met Magnus. The experience with Bébé was a good one because they shared common feelings of love. Also, Magnus understood her cycle, which she revealed to him. However, to Magnus, Bébé never really understood her menstrual cycle very well."

"I smell danger," remarked Lilly Loveless, noting in passing the currency of high school boys snatching the girlfriends of others.

"Before long he became aware of some changes in her and their relationship took a different turn. When Magnus asked her if she had noticed what he was noticing, Bébé said no. Even when his friend noticed the same thing and asked her when she last had her period, Bébé would not admit to being pregnant. Either she was manipulating and lying to them, or she didn't know herself at all. Failing to make her reveal the truth, Magnus swore he wouldn't accept responsibility if Bébé finally turned round to admit she was pregnant."

"How typical!" said Lilly Loveless. "Men, first in, first out."

"It was just two weeks before Magnus had to start writing his

Advanced Level exams."

"Not again," said Lilly Loveless, thinking of the earlier story between Comfort and Lionel.

"Things took another turn because Bébé's parents took her for a test and that is when it was revealed openly that she was seven months pregnant."

"Really? Seven months? And she didn't know?" Lilly Loveless couldn't believe her ears.

"Difficult to believe, but true. Bébé stole herself to his place and showed him the hospital book. Magnus was very angry and felt like slapping her but he held his breath and what he could say at that moment was that 'you feel say na over chop you di chop your belly big so?'

"She said she was confused and that her father said he wanted to know the boy. Magnus was more confused, as it was barely a week to his 'A' level exams. He forced Bébé to keep his identity a secret, and not to talk until he was through with his exams. He even threatened that if she revealed his name and he was locked up, he would come out and kill her and the baby."

"Locked up? What for? Is it a crime to get someone pregnant? Is she below the age of sexual consent?" Lilly Loveless looked confused.

"Parents in Mimboland frown on irresponsible sexual encounters amongst the young, especially when they are not married," Britney explained. "And the forces of law and order are usually sympathetic to the parents in cases where such encounters result in pregnancy."

"Things are different where I come from," said Lilly Loveless. "But let me not take you away from your story."

"Thanks," Britney said and continued. "Bébé's parents threatened until she couldn't but reveal the one responsible. Magnus was in a dilemma. Just four days to his exams Bébé's father and another man came. He gave them seats and they sat for about 15 minutes without a word. Finally Magnus gathered courage and said, 'Pa any problem?' Pa was tapping his legs, took a long breath and finally responded with a question of his own: 'Do you know this girl?' Magnus said 'yes'. 'You put my daughter the family way and abandon her?' Bébé's father was not amused.

"Finally they reached the hands of the forces of law and order and Magnus was summoned after writing his first paper. He went to the Gendarmes and was bailed by a nephew, who signed a form for Mim\$ 500,000.

"Magnus went to see Bébé and they forged dates, claiming that she started going out with him only after she was pregnant. The idea was to convince the Gendarmes he couldn't have fathered her pregnancy. It worked. The Gendarmes accepted the forged document and Magnus was freed, much to the surprise of all who had hoped to see him punished for what they knew was his crime.

"That was how Magnus came out of this trouble, for the pregnancy was his indeed, and he is taking care of the child. At least, as much as a flying-shirt can be said to take care of a child. Sorry I don't have information on how the child's mother is doing."

Lilly Loveless was happy with Britney's work. By now the sun was higher in the sky and the day heating up. They each opened a bottle of Mim-Wata for a drink. They had been joined on the beach by a voluminous Mboma

and a Barbie-like girl who could have been the one just described by Britney. He and the girl sat under one of several of the straw roofed umbrellas lining the beach. They were too far away for Lilly Loveless and Britney to eavesdrop. But the waves were luckier, as they captured the voices of the two and carried away with them into the sea to feed the curiosity of the water spirits.

* * *

"The next story is short but it shows how you can control not only your girlfriend, but also members of her family," recommenced Britney. "It is about Lydia, a Form Five student at a government high school. Her parents are rich farmers and her father has a car, second-hand, but a car all the same. Her parents live in the village, but she stays in town with her elder sister who is also a student. Lydia dated her classmate Elvis and she found him interesting. Their relationship was flourishing and Elvis and Lydia were well known by their friends. Elvis had a friend who failed his exams in another school and was transferred to their school to repeat. This friend was so kind that when Lydia asked for money from Elvis, it was this friend who gave it to her.

"This continued for a long while and Lydia started finding the guy interesting. She visited him often and her interest in him was rising. She could not stop thinking of Elvis' friend. He kept on appearing in her dreams. Her interest in Elvis was diminishing. At times she visited his friend at odd hours. One day it happened unconsciously that they found themselves in each other's arms. It was what she had imagined and wished for long. The relationship boomed, Elvis suspected them, and spoke to them, but Lydia couldn't afford to give up on Elvis' friend, especially as he was rich and generous. He was not the type to make a girl complain as often as she heard others do: 'Wat kana boy be dis? You give girl mimbo and you finish drink-am you sep sep? Dis kana boy sep, ye fit give girl how much?' Finally, Elvis, being the simple flying-shirt that he was, gave up and took his distance from them. Lydia welcomed his decision.

"Lydia and Elvis' friend went on kissing and caressing in school and around town. Her elder sister hated the guy and never wanted to see them together. Lydia and the guy didn't care. They continued to enjoy life, spending most of their weekends in nightclubs and other entertainment attractions in town. Finally, Lydia got pregnant."

"Not an infrequent occurrence in the stories you've gathered," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Not at all," Britney agreed. "Pregnancies and STDs are common, and to be expected. What goes around comes around. As concerned Lydia, her parents had invested much hope in her. She was confused and didn't know where to seek help. She could only tell her closest friend who finally arranged with a traditional doctor for some concoctions to do away with the foetus. This was paid for by Elvis' friend. Unfortunately for Lydia, her best friend went quietly behind her back and told her elder sister. Her sister talked to her but Lydia was headstrong. She could not afford to miss the one she loved. Finally, she and the guy convinced her elder sister to see that we are in modern times and a girl of Lydia's age is supposed to have a boyfriend. What they actually did was to use money to soften the elder sister. This guy bought

presents for her."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless rhetorically. "Money sure does talk."

"If you've got it, you can get what you want, some think."

By now, the beach was spread pell-mell with towels and sunbathers and small groups of people chatting and chattering away effortlessly. Hawkers had started to show up to propose a host of handmade objects, condoms and other items to the emerging beach consumer community. Lilly Loveless put her recorder into the pocket of her shorts, and with Britney took a break, walking awhile along the water's edge.

When they returned to their towels, two handsome Mimbolanders had situated theirs strategically close. Britney explained that she had just one more story to recount and Lilly Loveless suggested they seek shelter under one of the umbrellas. They collected their towels and their Mim-Wata bottles and resettled, much to the displeasure of the two invaders. They sat for a moment to appreciate the ebb and flow of the sea. Then Britney began, fidgeting with the end of one of her braids.

* * *

"Valérie is a girl of 19. She is from a peasant family. Her father died when she was in Form Three, but her mother sees to it that she attains a certain level of education. Valérie is presently in Form Five in a Catholic school. Her first date was when she was in Form Four and it didn't last long because the guy gave her little money. She stayed alone for about a month to make a good choice about who could afford her needs. An opportunity came when she knew a certain medical doctor. This doctor was a family friend to her younger sister, who was already married. At first it was known to the public as an issue of family friend, but Valérie was actually dating and even staying with him.

"Valérie says the doctor is married but his wife is abroad, so she is in sole control of the house. At times she spent about three months in his house, where he lived together with his two younger brothers. Valérie says she feels happy because she enjoys facilities in that house which are not in their house and more important is the fact that she is dating a whole medical doctor."

"Prestige?" queried Lilly Loveless.

"That's how she sees it, as prestige. And she is probably right. Doctors are not as cheap and affordable as groundnuts, are they?"

"I bet not."

"Valérie says she faces no problem back at home. The doctor comes into the house and fetches her at anytime without her mother getting irritated. At times her mom prepares food for them and when he comes in her elder brother greets the doctor and discusses with him in ways that suggest he uses his sister to buy favours from the doctor. Valérie says she loves the doctor very much and prefers spending time in his place to spending time in their house. She says they have a lot of fun and the doctor even tried to teach her how to smoke but she has gone only so far as to light a cigarette. She doesn't really warm up to it, having read somewhere that if you want to die of smoking, start young and keep on at it."

"She seems to have found her Mr Right, has she?"

"Far from it! Mr Right Now, perhaps. All is not rosy for Valérie."

"Complicated, affairs! Hope things don't get too bad for her,"

interjected Lilly Loveless.

"Well, she is facing numerous problems, mostly what we call 'congosai.'"

"Congosai?"

"Yes, her name and the name of her family are the topics of the day in that locality. Valérie says people are talking much about her, saying that she is dating a man who cannot abandon his wife to marry her. She says 'Na jealousy'. Her mother finally complains that she is tired of so much gossiping. At one time people say she has given her daughter in marriage but she ignores them and what she says is that 'make all man born pikin.'"

"Meaning?"

"Everyone should have the opportunity to mother a child, I think," replied Britney. "But it could also mean that only parents know how difficult controlling a child can be... Sorry I took the statement for granted."

"We all do," Lilly Loveless reassured her. "You don't want to keep interrupting the interviewee the way I do with you – which is different because you are my research assistant. But you mustn't hesitate to ask questions or seek clarifications. It is true that many informants simply don't have the patience for scientific ways of finding out, and that since we are usually begging them to help us out with answers to our research questions, we can't be choosers. Yet with a bit of skill, you'd be amazed by how much information people are able to share with you, even when they start off being reluctant to open up. Of course, some ambiguities and incomprehension are bound to creep into the data you collect, but devising and mastering techniques for getting as much as possible out of those we interview, should guarantee satisfactory results." Following this very inspired pronouncement, Lilly Loveless asked Britney to hold on so she could record for future reference in her notebook, what she had just said.

"Valérie does not only face problems with the society, she also faces a problem with other girls dating her doctor, and using every dirty trick in the book to win him over."

"Oh my goodness," Lilly Loveless shook her head as if that could ward off what had already happened.

"Valérie had a bitter experience with a woman, her teacher Mrs Fidelis, who was also dating the doctor."

"Her teacher?!"

"Yes, one day this woman came to the doctor's house and looked at Valérie from head to toe, with contempt. Valérie told the doctor that if he ate the food the woman brought, she would never cook food for him again. He actually ate the food without hesitating."

"A slap in the face for Valérie," said Lilly Loveless.

"And Valérie is used to him doing naughty things. Also he brings his girlfriends with him to the master's bedroom, while Valérie goes to the guestroom."

"Valérie says: 'I can't leave the doctor, firstly because he supplies me with my needs and for me to date a doctor is prestige.'"

"She certainly knows what she wants," Lilly Loveless interjected again.

"Valérie says she has been pregnant once by the doctor but they dealt away with the baby. And life continued."

"Amazing," said Lilly Loveless. "Let me get you right, the medical doctor dealt away with the pregnancy by an abortion?"

"Yes, and life goes on."

"Is life going on for both of them?"

"She feels very free with him. Her major problem is that she performs poorly at school because she spends too much time at the doctor's place. Sometimes she feels like abandoning school. She does not want anything to disturb her head.

"One day recently, he made the mistake of taking Mrs Fidelis into his room and then calling for Valérie, apparently for a bit of fun. So shocked, the two of them must have been infused with adrenaline to succeed in quartering him to the four bedposts with clothes from his closet and hightailing out of the house, abandoning him there until his brothers would arrive home. Valérie went crying to her mother and I don't know whether she will go back to the doctor's or not."

"My goodness," exclaimed Lilly Loveless as a wave came up to her toes, "calculated light heartedness one moment and suffering the next."

"You've collected a small host of diverse stories that shows the rampancy of certain behaviours we try to keep under wraps. But we've more work to do. Shall we head back to Puttkamerstown? I know you're going about your other commitments."

More than a few eyes followed Lilly Loveless and Britney with her flowing braids as the two, both dressed in blue, stepped their way through the colourful towels and tourists that polka-dotted the warm black sands.

The next morning Bobinga Iroko came by to give Lilly Loveless a ride to Mount Rebecca Hospital to see the doctor. She didn't have a quiet night with her tummy, which kept her rushing to the toilet throughout. Could it be the Watafufu and Eru she got initiated to at lunchtime? Or could it be the fact that the water she used to wash her hands was the same that had done several rounds of dirty hands in a plastic bowl? Washing hands in Mimboland is less about keeping hands clean than about redistributing dirt, and she fell prey to the practice, she thought. It could be the food, the water or even the glass from which she took her beer, which she couldn't vouch for. She saw the way used glasses and plates were dipped in soapy water, turned briefly, and taken out for washed. Eating out in public places here is always a risk, and until yesterday Lilly Loveless prided herself with having a fairly democratic tummy in this regard. The "miracle cure" of Bitter Kola and Guinness that Britney advised her to take did not achieve more than making her swear never again to eat and drink such an awful combination.

Once in the car, Bobinga Iroko handed her the latest copy of *The Talking Drum*.

"There's much in this issue of interest, but the open letter on Page 2 is more up your road," he said.

"Love War at Love FM?"

"Yep. It's bleeding research data for you all over Mimboland. The whole place is a giant incubator for affairs. Few can afford to make much ado about it, because everyone knows that fidelity is only skin deep. While Mimbo men love having mistresses, Mimbo women don't mind being deuxième bureaux but they don't want to be known as such, because society has made it impossible for a woman to be truly happy as a mistress. It is the same social order that provides for men to be unfaithful with nonchalance, while giving the very same men the license to crucify their women for any false step. On this matter Mimboland is not like Muzunguland, who behave like fowls, eating and wiping their beaks in the sand, and pretending that monogamy is the ultimate form of marriage. You now understand what I meant the day we met for the first time."

"What about?"

"About your research, the fact that it's so commonplace the phenomenon you study, that only a Muzungu would do such a thing, and only Muzunguland would find money for a study like yours."

"Long live Muzunguland, long live Muzungus." Lilly Loveless said, jokingly, turning her attention to the article.

* * *

"My dearest Romeo," the letter began.

"I am writing to express my deep gratitude for the trillion Mim dollar revelations you made last night during our telephone conversation regarding the calamity that befell our marriage; your seven-year-love affair with Miss Fifi-Snatcher, and most especially the plot to eliminate me.

"For the purpose of this letter, I will dwell only on the plot by you and Miss Fifi-Snatcher to eliminate me, which you referred to last night as 'Fifi-Snatcher's struggle to get me out of the picture' in order to marry you.

"The murder conspiracy disclosure finally puts the numerous attempts on my life within the proper context which include the mental and psychological torture caused by Miss Fifi-Snatcher's countless telephone calls at our home even as late as midnight and beyond, and the fact that you would receive and respond to these intrusive calls as if I did not exist.

"As if such torture was not enough, you inquired, in outrage, what I must have done to my person that nothing you say or do seems to be able to bruise me.

"You did everything to publicise your affair by riding together in Miss Fifi-Snatcher's car, or in our family car, attending parties together in the presence of our colleagues; taking her on missions for which she was not officially scheduled, in Sawang, for example, in the presence of our colleagues; and saying outrageous things about me in public mainly to prove how much your heart belongs elsewhere. How could a man who claims himself a respectable husband and father descend so low as to criticize in public 'the clumsy manner in which my wife kisses – she sticks out her tongue like a chameleon hunting for flies'?

"You went as far as driving our children to school in Miss Fifi-Snatcher's car and letting her drive our children in her car from a birthday party, while I was available, healthy and strong, and holder of a driver's licence and co-owner of our white silvery Mitsubishi Gallant.

"Romeo, you and Fifi-Snatcher could not wait for me to die in order for her to take her place beside you as the rightful mother of my own flesh and blood. And all of these public disgraces were done to humiliate and torture me.

"What morals do you Love FM stars think you have been teaching our own children, all those youths who thought our marriage was the model for them? Your affair became the talk of elementary, secondary and university campuses, family living rooms, streets, offices, and chicken parlours throughout our land of Mimbo. Students flocked into Love FM during vacation from all over the country and even from lands beyond to see what this phenomenal obscenity was all about and to find out how its direct victim, your lawfully wedded wife, was coping with it doing a job that put her in the limelight of shame all the time and still being able to keep her smile alive. Not to mention the agony I went through every Monday morning sitting in the Love FM editorial meeting round the same table with you and Fifi-Snatcher while our Manager, heads of services and all colleagues winced from what has been registered as the infidelity of the century. Our colleagues and others held their breaths wondering what move I would take in the face of what Fifi-Snatcher's father, a God-fearing man, described one Christmas Eve, as 'excessive provocation of the wife of another by my own daughter'.

"Romeo, as you disclosed yesterday, Fifi-Snatcher went ahead to pollute my number 113 office on the first floor of Love FM with witchcraft, voodoo, gri-gri, magic potions in the form of rats, cockroaches and a mysterious snake haunting my office and partying on my table and even in locked drawers. All of these happening in an office with locked doors intact. It was a daily occurrence that pestered my life to which you, my lawfully

wedded husband, were indifferent, turning down my incessant pleas to come see for yourself. These went on continuously for over a year and only stopped because I left Mimboland and that haunted office.

"My dear Romeo, while you and Fifi-Snatcher were busy celebrating your licentiousness in the most public places, Fifi-Snatcher spent a whole day and night in her Sakersbeach residence, as you told me, lamenting my pregnancy with hot tears. On hearing this, I was shocked into a state of deepest anxiety from then, when I was four months pregnant, till we lost that baby at seven months and almost my own life in the sudden miscarriage that November before the Christmas Eve when Fifi-Snatcher's father said his daughter had gone too far.

"Romeo, this sorrowful occurrence, or a happy one for you and Fifi-Snatcher, never moved you to sever your intimate links with her in spite of countless pleas from all over including Fifi-Snatcher's father, her uncle, your brother, your colleagues and friends, some of whom received the coldest rebuff for having made a life-saving plea. To the avalanche of pleas calling on her to leave my husband alone, she replied with callous nonchalance: 'Romeo is not chained to my leg, as you can see, and in any case, is an adult and well above the age of consent.'

"After all these attempts, the master plot was not yielding effective and quick results to tie in with your marriage plans, so Fifi-Snatcher as you said was saving up financially and you decided to help her out. A perfect excuse for abandoning your financial responsibilities to your wife and children, wasn't it?

"Romeo, how can I forget you squeezing my neck after taking complete control of my body one August night the year following the miscarriage, while I lay in bed, novel in hand, upon your arrival home between 12 midnight and 1am? The voiceless struggle to regain my breath under your deathly grip and just how I escaped death is a miracle to me today. The reason for this torture, if you need reminding, was that you were infuriated over the fact that I dared to call Fifi-Snatcher's house to pass on an urgent message from your brother in Zintgraffstown. I can still hear your voice even now, threatening 'who gave you the right to call her house?' And do you remember it was this very night you told me before leaving for the 8pm News that you were to discontinue your intimate relations with Miss Fifi-Snatcher? I should have known better that this was easier said than done. You certainly have not forgotten the February 14 I sent you a Valentine card, only for you to call Fifi-Snatcher with excited thankfulness. Instead of swallowing your pride when she told you the Valentine was not from her, you rushed home to attack me for making you make a fool of yourself in front of the woman you love.

"Another memorable thrashing left me with bruises all over with blood on my arms and legs, a swollen face and a red eye, all contained in the medical report I presented in court a few weeks later.

"Romeo, in order to bring your plot to fruition, you shamelessly battled me in front of my own sisters and our own children, dragging me to their room with a machete and cutting through the door. 'I go kill-am pay' is the response you gave to my sister when she tried to dissuade you from the insane brutality that was leading to murder.

"My dearest Romeo, the above facts selected from the dozen of

calamities I faced with you left me with no doubt as to the intensity of the affair with your concubine, and your common determination to pursue it. In the face of the danger it constituted to my life, I decided to humble myself, to step down, by making several free offers to you to divorce me and marry Miss Fifi-Snatcher. Your immediate reaction was the same all the time that you did not intend to marry her and that you love your wife and did not even want to be separated from her – the same story you told the judge in court. I must say this blood dribbling way of showing love is stranger than Count Dracula's.

"I asked for divorce not only for myself as a life-saving measure, but also to make the choice easier for you so that you tell the world it was not you but I, Juliet, who asked for the divorce. This, in my opinion would have relieved you from guilt or any kind of reprimand from whoever would have thought it was unfair for you to divorce me.

"Romeo, you turned down that offer, the free offer of a choice. And yet you continue your affair with Miss Fifi-Snatcher, and you both pursue the plot to eliminate me. You stalked me in Sakersbeach for the 15 days I escaped from home for dear life. You continue to threaten me even while I am in Muzunguland, my absence being another free opportunity for you having selfishly chosen to extend your licentious practices far beyond the traditional bounds of the system of deuxième bureau, Satan's fiesta of carnal wedding in Pandemonium, très à la mode in our dear land of Mimbo. Observing your audacious fiendish, vain, glorious celebration of adultery in holy and public places, even the most helpless loathsome nymphomaniacs or polygamists concluded that you both completely reverse the rules of the game – that is as foolhardy as trying to play God by meddling with human life. The story of Job in the Bible would have reminded you that even Lucifer was warned against such deadly choices.

"By staking your long overdue marriage plans on my blood in dealing with witchcraft-voodoo-gri-gri modern-day technicians, opting for an irreversible magical potion, you simply landed yourself in big time trouble. That is why my heart goes out to you and Fifi-Snatcher. What you simply did not know is that the blood in my veins belongs to the man, *Jesus Christ*. And the good news is that he shed his own blood for us all, God's children. There is comfort in the thought that a loving God knows best. With love from Juliet, Muzunguland."

"Is this letter real?" Lilly Loveless asked when she finished reading.

"Does it not look real to you?"

"It is courageous of her to want the whole world to read such intimate details."

"Perhaps she wants the world to learn from them, and to embrace Jesus Christ, the only man she can trust."

Lilly Loveless couldn't tell whether or not Bobinga Iroko was being tongue in cheek, or why.

"It is common for people who have experienced extreme shock, trauma or disappointment to seek solace in religion, so I perfectly understand Juliet. Is that her real name?"

"No."

"So the letter is fake?"

"That doesn't follow. She sent it under her real name, with many

other real names in the text, but we took an editorial decision to edit the names out."

"I now understand," said Lilly Loveless, and "wise decision too, else *The Talking Drum* could be sued for libel."

Just then they came to Mount Rebecca Hospital, situated on top of a hill that seemed to inhale inspiration from the gigantic Mount Mimbo that towered intercedingly into the skies. It comprised solid three-storey buildings plus a rectangular block where consultation took place.

There was already a long queue waiting for the doctor. Lilly Loveless bought a consultation card, paid the consultation fee, was asked to get samples of her stool, urine and blood for the laboratory, and to join the queue for those waiting to see the doctor.

It was eventually Lilly Loveless' turn to see the doctor, an elderly man who was extra generous with his hands, touching her beyond her comfort zones, but with a very straight professional face. He scrutinised her lab results and declared: "nothing serious... just a stomach bug... perhaps something you ate... you must be careful what you eat... mind that delicate stomach of yours." His twisted face glowed into one big smile: "A little malaria in your bloodstream... not too serious... Arsumax should take care of it." He wrote as he spoke. "Any allergies?"

Lilly Loveless shook her head to say none, as far as she could tell.

"But you are in a new setting with new foods, so watch what you eat and drink. Avoid those places that dare you with the words: 'chop shit, a million flies cannot be wrong'."

The prescription written, the doctor handed it to her together with his complimentary card. "Don't hesitate to call me in case of any problems, or if you want a drink or something to eat in a place safe," he told her, a playboy smile on his face.

She smiled back plastically, unsettled by his lack of professionalism and said, "Bobinga Iroko must be tired of waiting out there in the car," stood up and walked out even before they could shake hands, followed by his eyes.

Once in the car, Lilly Loveless told Bobinga Iroko about the doctor and his unique way of examining a patient.

"Female patients, to be more precise," Bobinga Iroko corrected. "He's new. Barely two weeks in the job. His predecessor left for further studies and greener pastures about a month ago..."

They were about to drive off when the following exchange between the Dr and the Reverend Sister filtered through to them from the open window to the Reverend Sister's office, by which Bobinga Iroko's car was parked.

"Sister Immaculate," the doctor called loudly, oblivious of the open window and the possibility of being overheard.

"Yes, doctor?" replied the Reverend Sister in a deep, commanding voice.

The eavesdroppers leaned forward, Bobinga Iroko switching off the car radio.

"Do you know you are very beautiful?" said the doctor.

"Yes, God made it so. And you, what are you doing here?"

"God made it so."

"What God?"

"Such beauty I've never seen."

"I'm using my beauty in the service of the Lord."

"I came to work at Mount Rebecca so I could use my eyes in the service of your beauty. I'm glad I can see you every day."

"The Devil works in mysterious ways."

"And so does the Lord."

"Why couldn't you come directly without using the job as an excuse?"

"To avoid suspicion."

"Not necessary."

"I love you."

"I consider you as my father and feel insulted that with all the respect I have for you, you want to tempt me this way. You are wicked to have come here with the intention of derailing a Reverend Sister."

"Please, please, don't say that. I mean well."

"You say you want to make me happy. Just imagine that you become the source of my sadness. Would you like that?"

"I wouldn't for the world. My mission is not a sad one."

"So why do you come here to tell me nonsense?"

"Are you ever tempted?"

"In what way is it your business?"

"Just curious how you handle your emotions..."

"To Harkin to the call of the flesh is to obscure the call of the spirit."

"Man may not live by bread alone, but man cannot live without bread..."

"Leave my office!"

Lilly Loveless and Bobinga Iroko heard the door slam angrily.

"Next time, it shan't only be my office you leave. I shall see to it you leave Mount Rebecca Hospital." The Reverend Sister warned in a boiling voice.

* * *

The exchange between the doctor and the Reverend Sister nurse reminded Bobinga Iroko of a story, the source of which he couldn't remember. It was the story of a husband who arrives home earlier than normal. His wife panics upon the sound of his keys in the door, rushes the man in her bed into a closet.

In the closet, the man is startled by the voice of a little boy: "Isn't it dark in here?"

"Who are you?" the man asks.

"Never mind," says the boy. "I overheard all what you were doing with mom, and I'm going to tell my dad."

"Please, don't, I beg you," said the man, handing him a Mim\$ 5000.

"This is too little," the boy complains.

"That's all I have got," says the man.

At lunch that day, the boy takes out the Mim\$5000 to show his dad, making his mother freeze with fear.

"Dad, here is money a man..."

"What man?" his father interrupts, furious. "I have told you never to accept money from people," he yells. "Now, like a good Catholic boy, you go

right away and confess your sin to the Reverend Father,” thundered his dad.

The boy abandons his lunch grumpily, rushes to church, and enters the confessional.

“Isn’t it dark in here?” the boy remarks.

“Not you again!” exclaims the man at the other end of the confessional.

“Cruel joke,” commented Lilly Loveless, laughing her lungs out, despite her stomach upset.

“Cruel joke?” said Bobinga Iroko, feigning disbelief. “Wait until you’ve heard this one.”

“Another?”

“Yes,” said Bobinga Iroko. “A little boy runs into his mother’s room and catches her topless. ‘Mommy, Mommy, what are those?’ he says pointing to her breasts, with typical innocence. ‘Well, son,’ says his Mom, ‘these are balloons, and when you die, they inflate and float you up to heaven.’ He goes his way, quite satisfied. After all, why shouldn’t he believe his mom? A few days later, Mom is in the kitchen cooking when the boy storms in again. ‘Mommy, mommy, Aunt Mimi is dying!’ A dubious smile on her face, the mother asks: ‘What do you mean?’ She is astonished as she knows no healthier person than her youthful pretty sister, Mimi. ‘Well she’s out in the orchard, lying down under a pawpaw tree. Both of her balloons are out, Dad’s blowing them up, and she keeps yelling: God, I’m coming! God, I’m coming!’”

“It takes a Bobinga Iroko to collect jokes like these,” Lilly Loveless laughed and hit him playfully on the shoulder. “You’ve got soft lovely hair,” she said, touching his hair gently. “Do you visit Lulu to have it retouched?”

“Retouch... my hair?” Bobinga Iroko found the question ridiculous.

Lilly Loveless nodded.

“Never!” Bobinga Iroko was categorical. “That’s women’s business. All I do is apply Vaseline on dry scarp, and when the hair is overgrown I know where to go to bring everything down.”

“I see,” said Lilly Loveless. “I have an Internet joke very similar to yours about the little boy,” she moved away from hair.

“Tickle my ears with it.”

“The boy runs into the room and catches his mom naked. ‘Mommy, what is that?’ he says pointing to her womanhood. ‘Jerusalem’, says the mother. Two days later, the boy catches his father naked. ‘Daddy, what is that?’ asks the boy, pointing to his manhood. ‘Jesus’, says the father. A few days later the boy’s sister surprises him watching through the keyhole of the parents’ bedroom. ‘What are you doing?’, inquires the sister. ‘I am watching Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem’, replies the boy.”

“Welcome to the Bobinga Iroko joke club,” said Bobinga Iroko, roaring with laughter. “You should tell the Reverend Sister that!”

* * *

On the way back, Bobinga Iroko stopped by his office to assign junior colleagues to cover various events planned for the day. He sent two reporters, a male and a female, down to the university where the strike was still raging despite efforts by various high level state officials to negotiate between the administration and the striking students. Demands made by students kept

mounting, as the police and gendarmes acted with ever more brutality.

The VC gave them all the encouragement they needed with such incendiary declarations as: "If the family and lecturers cannot teach these delinquents right and wrong, then the state must do so with an iron fist"; and "Many of the students are actually using the strike to avoid what they loathe: 'too much book, book, book at the university'."

At night students mounted barricades at the university junction and other strategic locations round campus, but during the day, truckloads of police and gendarmes armed to the teeth descended to clear the barricades and impose a semblance of law and order, in tune with the VC's determination "to prove that we are capable of taking tough decisions."

"Any pictures yet of suspicious activity at the entrance to the university where rites were performed?" Bobinga Iroko asked one of the reporters.

"You mean the shrine?" asked the reporter, a smile on his face.

"That's the name you've given it?"

"That's what students call it," said the reporter. "It is rumoured that no picture can be taken of the shrine."

"Cameras are not allowed there?"

"When a picture is taken there, the film is blank," said the journalist.

"Take your camera along and keep trying," instructed Bobinga Iroko.

"Yes, Sir," said the reporter, leaving for the assignment.

Through with assigning the reporters, Bobinga Iroko attended to a few more things, including telling off a student journalist on an internship in the hearing of all those present: "You fail to marshal your ideas. You write the way a hen eats; you peck. Emotion is good when you write, but it should not distort your facts. I prefer a boa constrictor..."

What a slave driver, Lilly Loveless thought, and a scary one at that.

Bobinga Iroko sat down for "just a couple of minutes to check my mail". It took much longer than a few minutes, but he was conscientious, as he kept asking Lilly Loveless, who was reading the paper, to be patient and give him a little more time.

Finally through with his office, Bobinga Iroko and Lilly Loveless drove to the police station where Dr Wiseman Lovemore was in his 12th day of detention without trial. Their request to see him was turned down. Express instructions from above, they were told. What above? Bobinga Iroko almost exploded. What impunity! Mimboland na Mimboland. He was determined to put an end to this nonsense.

"Enough is enough," Bobinga Iroko protested. "Mimbolanders are sick and tired of directionless leadership and impunity. How can Longstay claim to be in charge when no one knows where he is heading? To go round and round in circles like a beheaded cockroach is hardly what Mimbolanders expect of a leader who has been in power for over forty years. Has he never heard of the law of diminishing charisma? *The Talking Drum* will leave no stone unturned until there is rule of law in Mimboland! And all who truly mean well for this country should be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause. If he has taken us for a ride for four decades, it is because we have allowed him to think of us as a scorpion: it knows it has a deadly sting, but fears to lose its life if it uses it."

As they drove off, they could hear one policeman asking the others

amid explosive laughter: "Na which kontri he check sey he dey?"

"Foolish journalist," they mocked. "We'll make sure he goes on a long journey soon, if he continues like this."

Bobinga Iroko told Lilly Loveless that modern leadership in Mimboland was a total disappointment. He referred to the past in glorious terms, painting what to her was obviously an overly romantic picture of enlightened kings. Both from oral traditions and his reading of the works of prominent historians of Africa's glorious past, he gave her this lecture on kings who were sometimes so conscious of their role that they tried in every way to maintain contact with the people. They would go out of their way to investigate grievances directly, so as to feel the political and social pulse of the communities over which they presided. It was all too common for kings to disguise themselves at night and infiltrate lower class neighbourhoods incognito, listening to conversations and taking notes in the interest of policy. In cases where they stubbornly opted for the divine right of kings, extremely violent revolts by common people against their rulers were not uncommon. Royal families were completely wiped out in some cases, with the rebels ensuring that even foetuses were extracted from the wombs of women of royal descent. Wasn't it ironic that in a republic when freedoms should be most guaranteed and activated, liberty was most in chains? His argument, however exaggerated, was compelling, but all the more daring, given the repressive climate in which his subversive thoughts were being expressed.

Lilly Loveless feared for Dr Wiseman Lovemore. She feared for Bobinga Iroko as well. Even with the help of *The Talking Drum*, she could not see them bearing on the feebleness of their shoulders the full weight of having to contest a tropical dictatorship reputed to melt iron wills like butter? It was OK to joke in private, as often Bobinga Iroko did, that if one were to take out the retina of a dictator, one would see FEAR permanently etched onto it, which would explain why the eyes of dictatorship are constantly shouting. But he should know better than to dare to repeat that in public or publish a truly critical piece along these lines in *The Talking Drum*. Was it not a Mimbolander intellectual who wrote that 'Power is a heady wine so sweet that none has been known to lay it down willingly'? If what she had read of the sterile brutality of Mimboland dictatorship was anything to go by, there was every reason to fear for her two friends.

Once there was a man sitting under a mango tree. He had six fingers on each hand and six toes. Most people in the village were perplexed by his desire to sit under the mango tree all the time. Only when the fruit came into season did they understand his undisputed claim for the seat under the tree which he had carved for himself using a knife which he kept very sharp with a stone that he kept close by. The children called him 'keeper of the mango tree' and loved screaming out his name in sunny or rainy weather. He kept the area around the tree clean and many believed he slept there. He would be up at the crack of dawn, before anyone was up. Nobody knew whether he had a wife, because when asked: 'So where are your wife and children, Mr Mango?', he answered, 'Oh, they are all over...' But he was clean and well dressed. He was polite and kind to everyone who passed by, wishing them good morning and goodnight even on those days when everybody had become so busy that paying the usual courtesies of centuries now seemed such a chore. They would rush to watch football, or go off to evening parties passing within yards of where he sat, but some would not remember to say a word. When he yielded to football, it was his favourite team he watched, and it was his favourite team he wanted victorious. He would curse, kick, swear and score better than the players actually involved. The sound of silence around him would be phenomenal as the game between the two teams kept him glued to his TV, a cold beer in hand such that the world beyond was almost forgotten. If and when his team lost, his disappointment was so telling and so profound as to give goose pimples even to a ghost. Away from football, he was not embittered, or rushed, or judgmental. Come the mango season, just deserts would be had. Desserts of mango and salt, mango juice or pulp or just juicy mangoes running between the fingers and watering the parched throat after all those seasons of waiting. Mmmmmmmmm.... Come the mango season.

With a story like that, how could Lilly Loveless resist buying the mangoes that this joyful old lady sitting by the roadside, weaving baskets to keep herself busy, was selling? Lilly Loveless paid thrice more than what she was asked to pay for four mangoes. "The rest is for your beautiful story," Lilly Loveless told the elderly lady, who thanked her profusely and said: "Do come back again and again, for I have got many more stories up my mango tree."

Lilly Loveless went home all spiced up with fruity feelings.

* * *

It was a Saturday and Lilly Loveless had invited Britney over to her place for a surprise. She had learned, discretely, that Britney's birthday was coming up when she photocopied Britney's national identity card as part of the documentation she needed to pay Britney. This was her own way of showing that Britney was more than just a hired hand.

Britney pressed the door bell just on time and Lilly Loveless rushed to pull on tan trousers and a green pullover top and get the door. It was the first time for Britney to visit Lilly Loveless' place at Desire's home, a sign of friendship in the making, she thought. She commented on how much natural

light there was, compared to the cramped student residential areas where landlords seemed to have signed a pact with darkness in the interest of money.

"It is almost always dark there," she told Lilly Loveless. "Our landlords believe a lot in the power of darkness to resolve problems or to create them."

Meanwhile Lilly Loveless, an eye for outfits as always, admired the ingenuity in the design of Britney's ochre-coloured dress that buttoned closed in front in a diagonal from one knee to the opposite shoulder, exposed her shoulder blades in the back and had a built-in scarf – that draped gracefully around her neck and down her back to her waist. I'm going to have to ask her to show me her tailor and have an outfit or two made, she thought, but wanted to keep the focus for now on work and on Britney's birthday.

Lilly Loveless opened the window for fresh air and invited Britney to sit at a table near it and overlooking the small street. While Britney settled in, she went to the kitchen to boil water for tea. As the tea brewed, she brought to the table some cake, yoghurt and two mangoes, and went back for the teapot, teacups, milk, and sugar.

"I hope you brought your appetite with you?" said Lilly Loveless, as she readied the table with impressive precision.

"A really fancy breakfast," commented Britney. And then when she saw Lilly Loveless put a pink candle in the cake, she exclaimed, "What is all this about?"

Lilly Loveless struck a match to light the candle and said, "Happiest Birthday." She followed this with an attempt to sing Nico Mbarga's pidgin birthday song. Midway, she abandoned it for Stevie Wonder's.

Britney looked a little embarrassed. She explained to Lilly Loveless that it was very kind of her but that birthdays are not a big deal in Mimboland. Nonetheless, at the insistence of Lilly Loveless, she made a wish and blew out her birthday candle and the two settled down to their special breakfast of Mango, yoghurt, cake and tea, making Britney think of Maria Antoinette, one time queen in Muzunguland, who was said to have wondered why ordinary citizens should strike for want of bread when there was cake to offer them. Their conversation wandered from Britney's sweet smells, lovely thighs and attires, and studies to Lilly Loveless's research. "You really do put your whole self into it, don't you Lilly?" observed Britney.

Lilly Loveless smiled. "Don't you have to when you want to get inside something?" They both chuckled. "So," Lilly Loveless got up to put on in the background a pirated CD of Grace Decca she picked up from a hawker the other day, "what inside stories do you have today?"

"More on how materialism can drive us," said Britney, thinking to herself if she was exactly right when she said birthdays are not that fussed about in Mimboland. She could recall girls as far back as her secondary school days, who would not talk to their boyfriends if they as much as forgot their birthdays. Then, girls used to insist on buying biscuits, pizza, bread, blockade, sweets, a bottle of Fanta or Coke, gathering friends and classmates, and celebrating their birthdays. Whether or not there is a boyfriend or Mboma to make it grand, birthdays have been and remain important for Mimbo girls. So why had she told Lilly Loveless that they didn't matter? Perhaps she was referring more to herself, that birthdays didn't mean much

to her, personally. Even then...

* * *

Lilly Loveless clicked her recorder on. "Eunice is a girl in lower sixth at a government high school. Her first boyfriend was a motor electrician. She says she loved him, which is why she went out with him. She encountered so many problems with him but still loved him. He dated several other girls and finally it came to a point where she herself was tempted to date her mathematics teacher, Donatus."

"Donatus? Sounds like the name of a monk," remarked Lilly Loveless, examining her recorder to ensure it was taping.

"Donatus was so caring though he went out with other girls," Britney ignored the remark. "When her motor electrician got news, he fought with Donatus. The result was that finally she fell out with the motor electrician. She continued with Donatus without problems. The relationship ended because of the fact that he joined a Pentecostal church and started kicking against such practices. Since Eunice could not conform to his new ideas, she left and stayed alone for some time.

"Her friends were very proud and dressed expensively. Seeing this, her taste for nice dresses increased and so she vowed to date a man who could give her much money, and a man with whom she will face fewer problems. One day as she was coming back from school a BMW 'S' stopped and offered to help her to her destination. The man inside gave Eunice an appointment in a hotel. She acted accordingly and they established a relationship. Brother, as the man prefers to be called, is the right man for her. He is married, but he lavishes Eunice with cash, as she and her youthful exuberance bring out the full meaning of his flashy BMW as a symbol of his achievements. She now affords expensive dresses. He equips her house, and her church and God have taken second place.

"All that?" quipped Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, the good things were flowing. Eunice's problem with Brother was too much gossiping by people around them."

"What we call congosai?"

"I see you've really been paying attention, and getting deeper and deeper into our society and its ways of seeing, doing and saying."

"Not as much as I would like, but I am doing my best. That's what research is all about, I think. At least the kind of research I do."

"Eunice has problems with Brother's wife at times," Britney continued. "What she does is to run for her life whenever his wife faces her. Eunice has once been impregnated by Brother, but since she could not afford to keep the pregnancy, they aborted it. She is presently still in love with him and he takes great care of her and even helps her younger sisters. Though her society sees it as immoral for a young girl like her to be dating a middle aged man who is married, Eunice sees it as prestige dating a man who owns a BMW and much more. Something all her religion and fervent nonstop prayer sessions failed to deliver."

"One helping out with siblings and the other dating for prestige?" Lilly Loveless' mind was at work making connections.

"Things are starting to sound familiar aren't they?" asked Britney.

"I read somewhere BMW means Beer Men and Women," said Lilly

Loveless.

"It also means Break My Window and take me home, and if things work out, Be My Wife."

"I like that, could you repeat it please?"

There came a knock at the door and Lilly Loveless opened it up to Desire, her landlady, who greeted them, explained she was going away for several days and left her key so Lilly could water her plants for her.

"No problem," said Lilly Loveless, "travel well." She sat back at the table just as 'Donne-moi un peu d'amour' started to play and Britney commenced recounting another story.

* * *

"Emelda is a level 200 student here at UM. Her love experiences date back to when she was in Form Five and she explained how this continued up to the university. Her first love relationship was with Bernard, whom she says was calm, loving and caring, and his parents were rich. Actually, she fell in love and was nearly bursting with ecstasy. They spent nice times together. They went out in the evenings to nightclubs and snack bars."

"Nightclubs and snack bars? They were both students, weren't they?"

"Yep," replied Britney and continued. "Despite the good times, Emelda never felt she was part and parcel of Bernard. Her parents are both civil servants – teachers – and they provide for her needs reasonably well. She lived a normal life because she had her daily bread. 'So, please, I had never thought of dating a man because of money' Emelda said. Her parents were very strict, and kept chasing boys away from her by threatening to skin alive any boy they caught near their daughter: 'I promised to teach my parents, because when you want to go anywhere they say no.' She faced problems in the house with her parents when she stole herself out to see Bernard. Otherwise her experiences with him were totally free from problems."

"When things are going good, we've seen that something happens. So what happens?" asked Lilly Loveless as she poured a second cup of tea for each of them.

"Well, it came to a point where she faced the greatest temptation of her life. Her family lived in a neighbourhood where there was a girl who influenced young girls to date 'bourgeois' or Mbomas."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless with wide eyes.

"Would I make it up? This girl had links with many rich men and helped them to get young girls, for which she got paid a finder's fee, like a matchmaker," Britney explained with a touch of impatience.

"I can't believe it." Lilly Loveless continued to look incredulous.

"Believe it!" insisted Britney. "Don't you watch African movies?"

"I've watched a couple, from South Africa," said Lilly Loveless.

"That's not good enough. You should watch Nollywood films from West Africa."

"And what have these got to do with Emelda's story?"

"You wouldn't be surprised the way you were a while ago, after seeing all those glamour girls and how they, in the name of love, manipulate and manoeuvre one another and men for material possessions."

"Where can I get some of the movies around here?" Lilly Loveless was interested, partly because she harboured the suspicion that Britney could

be getting or embellishing some of her stories with stories from there.

"All over the place, from hawkers walking the streets, in shops, on the pavements, all over, even on TV."

"Could you recommend some you feel I must watch?"

"No problem. Tomorrow," said Britney. "Nothing goes for nothing," she added, resuming her story. "And when this girl proposed what she did, Emelda said she wasn't interested because she feared the eyes of the public. But the girl insisted.

"She explained to Emelda that Bernard could do little for her. He was just a student, dependent on others for sustenance. She reminded Emelda that she was a beautiful girl who qualified to dress in the latest and best outfits and boutique shoes. Emelda says she passed through tough times because this girl was always near her telling her about the honourable parliamentarian she wanted to hook her up with. This man had a house in the quarter where they lived, and had three children. Then one day, she realised that the honourable man was Bernard's father."

Britney nodded when Lilly Loveless looked up again, her eyes wide open with question marks.

"Emelda insisted: 'I never wanted to do it but this girl made me fall in the trap.'

"She said: 'I finally told Bernard off and started my deal with his father. We were and we are still doing it in hiding because the honourable is married and honourable.' Their meeting place is his rest house. 'He washes me with cash as if cash is water to him.' Emelda says she finds it difficult to leave him but she recognises that she has committed much atrocity. Wondering why she was telling me all this, Emelda said: 'I have an elder sister but I have never told her anything about my life.' She adds: 'I find it hard to say it but my elder sister is dating Bernard.'

"Incredible," Lilly Loveless murmured, "what next?"

Britney recounted how "once Emelda had the opportunity to attend a party in the honourable's house and to her greatest surprise she was chased out of the house by his wife. The wife, she admits, 'never knew about me but one of the honourable's nieces had got some little bit of congosai which she shared with the wife.' In the midst of the guests Emelda was disgraced, and so was the honourable's family. His wife took the microphone, brought it to the heart of her mouth, called Emelda and told her to get out."

"Over the microphone? In front of all the guests?"

"We could get through this more quickly if you would just listen," suggested Britney with a big smile.

Lilly Loveless lowered her eyes at this and concentrated on her notebook, telling herself not to be shocked by whatever would come next.

Feeling encouraged, Britney continued, "Emelda was there with her elder sisters and they carefully walked out. This disgrace to Emelda is nothing though her name is the topic of the day. The major reason why she was chased from the house, Emelda believes, is that she had on her neck the same necklace just like the one the honourable's wife was wearing, which must have confirmed all the wife had heard. The wife had brought the two necklaces back from Muzunguland, and the husband had paid for one, pretending that it was a friend who wanted it for his wife.

"Emelda says: 'My experience with the honourable in person is a nice

one. I have become materialistic in such a way that I love him. I face problems with his wife.”

“We saw evidence of that,” Lilly Loveless reminded Britney who glared at her gently. Lilly Loveless met her eyes, smiled and lowered hers again, opening wide her ears.

“The wife actually went to their house and told Emelda’s father to warn her, but Emelda didn’t care, although she admitted facing problems with her parents. ‘They talk to me every minute. Others, my teachers included, have talked about it since I was in high school. At times I really feel uneasy. But I enjoy the cash and attention. My relationship with Bernard is not actually cordial but I couldn’t care less, as my sister has stepped in to attend to him.’

“Emelda says that presently at the university her father affords her rent, needs and fees and she stays in a self contained house. The honourable gives her Mim\$100,000 at the beginning of the semester, ‘but he flows me cash most times when I go to check on him in Sawang.’

“Emelda reveals: ‘After my first semester holidays I left our house and my father took me in his care to the bus station where he paid my ticket to return to UM. When he left, I sold the ticket to someone because I had an appointment with the honourable in a hotel. Later in the day when my dad called to find out if I had a safe journey back to Puttkamerstown, I actually answered from under the honourable, attending to fire down below.’”

Lilly looked up from her notepad, but did not say anything.

“Though Emelda feels fine with the honourable, she is still dating flying-shirts and she can’t take what he buys her to their house because her father would burn them all. So her riches are confined in Puttkamerstown when she goes on holidays. Emelda confesses about the honourable: ‘He is old and I don’t enjoy sex with him. My fire is much too strong for him to quench.’ She was once pregnant by him, but the girl who arranged for her to go out with the honourable, also arranged for her to have an abortion.”

Instead of saying “Really?” Lilly Loveless just drummed her fingers on the table and squeezed her eyebrows together.

“Recently, Emelda discovered she has a rival. She met her at the honourable’s rest house and they fought but his workers separated them. Emelda says the girl who arranged for her to go out with the honourable ‘is a crazy two-side cutlass,’ because she was the one who looked for the new girl as well, but she is determined to show her who is crazier. She is ready to bring her anger to bear like a burning spear to the matchmaker. She threatens to take to the press salacious digital photos she took of herself and the honourable using her cell phone, should he continue with the new girl. Should he persist with his perverse sense of pleasure, there would be nothing honourable about him by the time she finishes with him.”

* * *

Lilly Loveless was relieved when Britney finished recounting Emelda’s story and suggested they go for a short walk in the morning air that was humid yet fresh. They cleared the breakfast dishes from the table and headed out, and greeted the neighbours who called out to Lilly Loveless. Who did they run into at the end of the street but Bobinga Iroko?

“So very good to see you,” Lilly Loveless greeted him, beaming from

ear to ear.

"Unlikely but true: I have just been thinking about you," said Bobinga Iroko, his face vibrating with liveliness. "I'd call it a coincidence, but I'm struggling with the entire concept of 'coincidence' right now."

"Truth is a meal one hardly finds on the table of flatterers, to quote Bobinga Iroko," said Lilly Loveless, with a laugh.

"When did I say that?" asked Bobinga Iroko, laughing as well.

"You say so many funny things that you don't remember," replied Lilly Loveless, "but I take notes, and can tell you exactly when and where. I'm a researcher, remember?"

"I shan't quarrel with you on that," Bobinga Iroko conceded.

"So what's happened again?" Lilly Loveless came back to Bobinga Iroko's mention of struggling with coincidence.

"Story long, time short," said Bobinga Iroko. "Let's chat over a beer, so I can update you on the goings on."

"Call me when you are free," Lilly Loveless told him.

"I will, I will," said Bobinga Iroko.

When he heard it was Britney's birthday, he congratulated her for spending it with a Muzungu who celebrates such things, teased that she was only getting more beautiful with each year, and gave and received a big hug.

"I'm after a big story, so if you'll excuse me ladies, I'll be on my way," he explained as if he had just been tipped off about an embezzlement somewhere and felt determined to feed the front page of *The Talking Drum* with the lurid entrails of a fat cat.

"Some call him a self-appointed detective," said Britney as she waved to a woman walking by with a platter of bananas for Lilly Loveless to buy some not too ripe ones.

"And you, what do you call him?" asked Lilly Loveless, a curious smile on her face.

"I'd call him an icon with iconoclastic tendencies," said Britney, borrowing the favourite expression of one of her lecturers.

"Meaning?"

"Someone who earns recognition thanks to an institution or an idea, but turns round and wants to destroy the institution or idea with his hunger for change."

"What makes you say that?"

"Isn't he an investigative journalist?"

Lilly Loveless didn't understand, but she didn't want to make a fool of herself either.

Back at her place, Lilly Loveless presented Britney with two small packages in gold coloured gift wrap, each with a red bow. Britney looked completely surprised but opened one and exclaimed, "How'd you find it?" It was the latest CD of Britney Spears. "I can't thank you enough," she added. It was no secret that she worshipped Britney Spears the way one does a Goddess. Every time she visited the Internet, she was sure to look for the latest gossip about her favourite pop star. Not so long ago, she read that Britney Spears was propositioned by tens of thousands of people daily thanks to the Internet, which made it possible for people to minimize the embarrassment of rejection that comes with face to face encounters. Just the other day, she read that Britney Spears was a powerhouse to her country's

economy, directly and indirectly bringing in millions and millions of dollars each year through such things as cosmetics and fragrances, sales of albums, endorsements, photography and tourism. Britney was so proud of Britney Spears, whom she had grown to love when she discovered years back that they shared the same first name. She would cherish the CD for a long, long time. She thanked Lilly Loveless again.

In the second package was an audio recorder, similar to the one Lilly Loveless used.

"For me?!" asked Britney, who was now the one with question marks in her eyes.

"For your own research down the road..."

"How lovely!" Britney exclaimed. "You are too kind, Lilly, much too kind..." She hugged her with tears of joy.

* * *

When Britney left Lilly Loveless's place, she went straight to the Internet café she frequented, to check her mail and update herself as usual on developments around Britney Spears. She felt relieved when she saw an email from Providence. She read it, beaming from ear to ear. Then she typed her reply:

"Dearest Sweetheart," she began, "I was about to think that you forgot my birthday when I saw your email. I don't know why the cell phone lines are terribly poor these days, but thanks for making the effort to call.

"I was at the post office this morning. How sweet and nice it was for me to receive three post cards and three letters from you at a go. I don't think you can ever guess how excited I was. I jumped, shouted, screamed. In short, I did everything you can imagine. I felt so happy, so proud and most of all so loved. I did not know exactly what to do in order to express my joy. Thanks my dear, you make me feel so happy, so proud, and so whole. It all seemed like you were just at the corner sending me teasing words of love. I wanted to read all of them at the same time. I have never had such a pleasant surprise. I am sure I amazed everybody who was around the post office this morning. Oh my God, you need to see the smile on my face right now as I write about it. Thank God for you and your continuous care. No man can replace or give what you give because you always do your things in a special and particular way. You are fascinating.

"It's amazing how much you think about and how nicely you express your thoughts. You give me all the attention even from that far away. My dear, you are all I needed to be happy, I just did not want to see it at first. Thanks for being there for me even when you can barely squeeze in the time. I do miss you my dear. Can you please blow me a kiss? Thanks. I just felt it. It is a nice one and very timely because I want you right now. I want to hold you in my arms once more, and warm up the winter cold that has been eating into you these past months. Don't , the moment you will see me, I will warm you up like I have never done before. It's a promise.

"It's nice to learn that you cook your own food. I have never been given the opportunity to really cook for you and eat with you in an environment where there are just the two of us. I hope some day soon. How do you cope with your Chinese, Taiwanese, etc. neighbours? I hope the communication flows, and you not only watch but share while grasping what

you can that is good from other cultures. You made me understand that there is a priest of Mimboland nationality over there, mind extending my greetings to him? I hope you guys don't only eat together but also pray together. You iron your own clothes? Weh ashia. That's what I should have been doing. You made mention of the fact that you were to wear a coat and tie to the formal reception of the university – wow! I know you hate wearing a coat and tie but you look dangerously handsome and smart in them. Congrats my dear for your election as an associate member of the Muzunguland Association of Biologists – the sky is not even your limit. I am so proud of you. From your letters I seem to be discovering Muzunguland with you. Magdalene sends her regards, and so does my friend Celine who has moved to Puttkamerstown with her husband who is permanently lecturing at the university.

“Here ends the reply to your first letter.

“Thanks for my photos you sent in your second letter. Wow, the pictures are so nice. I hope those on your wall do actually bring me home to you – the only place I wish I could be right now. Who do you say I am to those who comment about the pictures? Can I guess? No, I would not because I might guess wrongly. I hope you will tell me when you come home. I promise to display them in like manner in my room. I am so sorry the one Ellen took was bad. Thank God you are withholding the one you took of me and Dr Evans. Your action was not the least funny. I am sure you were just being you – jealous. Talking about Dr Evans, I have not seen him for a long time now. I last met him at a party to which I was invited by Josiane. I told him that I was not interested in his intentions. Rest assured there is nothing between the two of us. Please put that thought out of your mind. I don't even go to his hospital for the diet thing any longer. Thanks for understanding.

“Need I tell you how much I miss you? My mind and feelings are, and will for a long time remain frozen on the day you left for Muzunguland. I just could not imagine that you were going to get into that plane alone and go away no matter for how long. I could not stand it and don't think I will understand so soon.

“I'll write again tomorrow if the Internet connection is faster.

“I just closed my eyes and touched my lips gently to receive my birthday kiss from you. I felt the sensation. I am filled with emotions of love, friendship, respect for you as well as gratitude and admiration. As a lover you are the best, as a... you are the best, and especially you are just like a big brother I never had. I am very happy God sent me your way. It's been so fruitful and I will only be fooling myself if I don't tell you that you are the best thing that has happened to me since my daddy died.”

Bobinga Iroko had been busy for the past three days attending a workshop on an exciting new initiative. He had been delegated by his colleagues at *The Talking Drum* to lead discussions with some dynamic Mimboland in Muzunguland who want to introduce affordable blogging technology to give a solid online presence to powerful Mimboland voices – creative people, trendsetters, academics, journalists, etc. – through personal blogs that could easily be updated even from Mimboland where connectivity is as weak as the legs of a Mimboman neck deep in Mimbo. He has embraced the initiative wholeheartedly, and can be seen at drinking places explaining to everyone who cares to listen how *The Talking Drum* is going to be transformed within months. “The simplicity of the software involved entails that one does not need more than basic computer skills to be relevant, an aspect critical in our context where many newsrooms still can’t afford computers and the necessary technical sophistication to maximize their use.” Because he speaks and speaks over and over again about this initiative, those around him such as Lilly Loveless and Britney have picked up much about the Internet, blogging and citizen journalism.

Bobinga Iroko feels that this technology is particularly useful for Mimboland, where repressive laws and censorship have contributed to stifling freedom of expression and drying out vital sources of meaningful news and information. The press has been reduced to a level of underdevelopment that makes print runs perpetually difficult to predict, and yields little profits beyond what it takes to barely subsist. No substantive print runs have meant little advertisement revenue, which in turn has pushed journalists to cut corners to make ends meet through brown envelope journalism and other forms of prostitution. *The Talking Drum* thus welcomes the initiative, which it hopes to use to bypass conventional channels of repression and gate keeping by the government and its praise singers. In this way *The Talking Drum* will be better able to reach out to its diaspora readership, while relying at the same time on the expertise and resources of the diaspora in the development and administration of its website. The most exciting thing Bobinga Iroko has picked up, so he says, is the fact that “the blogs are very democratic in their design. Blog owners do not have to rely on a webmaster to update the blog as is the case with standard websites; the reader is not just a passive consumer but an interactive participant who is free to comment on any story – usually anonymously – with little or no restriction.” Bobinga Iroko could fathom what a Godsend blogging would be to *The Talking Drum* and to the striking students and its other readership whose lips have been zipped by dictatorship masquerading as democracy.

With Bobinga Iroko busy on the new initiative, Lilly Loveless has had more time to spend exclusively with Britney, Prince Anointed of the Archives, and other informants she comes across more by chance than by design.

This morning, Britney agreed to help Lilly Loveless pick out fabric for her tailor-made outfits. They just left the market, satisfied with their selections of beautifully designed fabric by the renowned Mimbo Fabrics International Company and settled at a nearby snack bar for some work.

"David is a government official in service in Puttkamerstown," began Britney even before drinks were ordered.

Lilly Loveless fumbled for her recorder and notebook and pen.

"Aged about 45, handsome and gentle in appearance, he is married, and the father of many children. He has many girlfriends of varying ages despite his reputation as 'Japanese handbrake,' which means a man who is slow at providing financial assistance to women. To people who don't know him, he likes to boast: 'Men may have their shortcomings as far as women are concerned, but none of the girls one sees around these days is woman enough to cause trouble in my home.'

"A few months ago, he met Sandra, and they started dating. Sandra, who was living in relative harmony with her neighbours, all of a sudden became proud. She would hardly greet them any more and would look at them as though from a pedestal. Her neighbours started hating her, and talking badly about her affair with David."

Lilly Loveless took the recorder from the table and asked Britney to hold it and speak into it so her voice wouldn't get buried by the noise spilling over from the chatty market men and women and passers-by in the street.

"David visited Sandra more frequently," continued Britney, and "stayed with her in her room, and took her out to places. Many of Sandra's friends were annoyed because Sandra was only about 19, and was now neglecting her bookwork to provide more time for a relationship from which she reaped practically no material benefits. They tried to speak to her, but she was blinded by love."

"So the girl is 26 years his junior," Lilly Loveless contemplated out loud.

"One day, David's wife came to hear about this 'little girl who had practically seized her husband.' She wanted to talk to her husband, but felt it was mean to see a 19 year old girl – about the age of her own daughter – as a threatening potential rival. She nevertheless asked a relation of hers to show her the girl's place. Every now and then when she passed around the Catholic Church area where she was told Sandra lived, she would check for her husband's car.

"Most often, the car was parked near the girl's mini-cité. She had had enough of her husband always being with his girlfriend. One blessed afternoon, she saw her husband's car, rushed home, took the spare key, and hired a taxi to the Catholic Church. She then took the car away.

"Neighbours had seen his wife, but all decided to teach Sandra a lesson, by pretending not to have witnessed anything.

"Clever ..." noted Lilly Loveless.

"When David and Sandra came out of Sandra's room, they were shocked not to find the car. David started shouting that thieves had stolen his car. He made effective use of his position as government official and called top army officials in and around Puttkamerstown. Policemen came and made a 'constat', and he –David –rushed all over the place with hopes of tracing the car. He used his cell phone to call everybody and alert them to watch out for his car. At 2am, completely drained by the experience, exhausted and desperate, he realised that 'home is home.' He had to go home and face his wife with the story of the stolen car. Reluctantly, he took a taxi home. He was

so overwhelmed by circumstances that he hung his coat on his shoulder, not knowing exactly what to tell his wife about the whereabouts of his car. What was his car doing where it was stolen? What was he himself doing there?"

"A whole host of questions nagging him," Lilly Loveless mused.

"On reaching his house, he was dumbfounded to find his Mercedes SE nicely parked in the garage. The problem now shifted from his wife to his collaborators. Where would he tell them he had found his car? And what about the unnecessary scandal and alarm he had raised virtually everywhere? How would he tell them to stop searching?"

"Another whole new set of questions, isn't it?" Lilly Loveless remarked.

"Ashamed of himself, and feeling miserable, he hesitantly knocked at his daughter's window to let him in.

"She came to open the door, and greeted her father. He hardly answered. His authority and credibility had left him without as much as saying goodbye.

"He went to his room and found his wife fast asleep. He sneaked into bed, taking all necessary precautions not to wake her up. He was afraid. He dreaded another scandal.

"There was no scandal. In the morning, the woman got up, and started her day like any other day. She did not cough about the incident. Neither did David. His worry was his children might hear of their father's exploits, and withdraw the respect they had invested in him. The message had passed through."

"Pretty sly of his wife," commented Lilly Loveless.

"I thought so too," said Britney, "but no behaviour by a woman surprises me, given what our men can be up to. What I didn't get is whether his relationship with Sandra continues. Does he still visit her? With his car? And for how long? These are all questions of interest, but for which I have no answers. Stories are stories only to the extent that they end somewhere, isn't it?"

Lilly Loveless nodded. "In research you can't harvest more than you are told, or give more than what you know without doing the subject matter a disservice. So never feel under pressure to inflate or invent data just because you must give me what you think should qualify as a story. Better a short story well told, better the ugly truth than a beautiful lie. That's the golden rule of research," Lilly Loveless lectured.

After what seemed like an eternity, a young man in baggy trousers finally asked Britney and Lilly Loveless what they wanted to drink. Britney requested Pamplemousse and Lilly Loveless her Mimbo-Wanda.

"Isn't it a bit early for a young woman to be drinking beer?" asked the man with a sly grin on his face, but with an audacity that would cost him his job if his employer were to learn of it. For, how could anyone in the land of Mimbo prescribe drinking hours and get away with it?

Lilly Loveless met his eyes and said, "Only for a woman who hasn't already put in a day's work."

They all laughed.

"Could you also bring us two roasted plums and plantains from across the road?" she asked as she extended a few coins. She was amazed by how affordable Puttkamerstown was to a Muzungulander in terms of food

and drinks.

* * *

"Let's keep going," said Britney. "Paul, he's a Sawang based businessman, quite rich. He owns flashy cars, apartments, bank accounts at home and abroad, and a lot more. He is also very generous to those he loves. In fact, when he loves he gives."

"And it flows when he gives?" teased Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, he gives as much as he loves. The only thing he does not give a woman for whom he falls is liberty."

"Hmmm..."

"Paul and Annabelle had been dating for six months, when Paul proposed, or was asked, to provide Annabelle with better living conditions. She left the ghetto where she lived to an apartment in a high class area. Everything, from bed to TV, DVD player, deck and flashy cell phone, was bought for her. She was living in unprecedented luxury.

"Let it flow," teased Lilly Loveless again.

"But with all this wealth," continued Britney, by now used to Lilly Loveless' sometimes irritating interventions, "she was restricted to staying at home. There was a houseboy, as well as a night watchman at her service.

"All that?" remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, to ensure that she never aspires to liberty. Paul visited her after work, each afternoon, between 4 and 5pm. Any absence on her part was not tolerated. In fact, she did not have the right to go out, even for shopping, without prior authorization by her boyfriend. Even granted this permission, she would be accompanied by someone sent by Paul.

"She's under pretty tight watch," Lilly Loveless couldn't help but note.

"Yes, and her apartment soon felt like a prison to her. The only way she could escape from Paul's regulations was with the complicity of her houseboy. She made friends with him, and often gave him generous tokens.

"Soon after, her former boyfriend, the one she had before Paul, started paying her visits occasionally, then more and more frequently. They would go to her room, and 'play cards.'

"Games of hearts, I suppose?" asked Lilly Loveless.

Britney smiled and continued, still holding the recorder. "It so happened that Annabelle badly needed her houseboy to cook for her young boyfriend's birthday, which she was celebrating in his studio. Just at that period, the houseboy had asked for a three-day permission to go and visit his parents who were sick back in the village. Annabelle refused, and the boy insisted, but Annabelle was categorical. She even went on to remind him that she was the boss, and that he had to obey.

"The houseboy stayed, but told Paul about Annabelle's evasions, although Annabelle had given him some compensation for having stayed. The day just after the birthday, when Annabelle and her boyfriend were in her room reminiscing on the birthday, the houseboy called Paul on his cell phone."

"Oh, trouble," insisted Lilly Loveless.

"By the time Paul arrived, they were through. On seeing Paul's limousine through the window, she asked her boyfriend to run out while

Paul parked in the garage. But Paul was smart enough, so that he met the young man just as he was coming out of the apartment.

"Paul stormed in and asked Annabelle who the young man was, and she tried to tell him that he was a relative of hers. Paul reminded her of the fact that he had control over who could visit her. Besides, why had he never met or heard about this relative before, if relative he was?"

"Annabelle changed the subject, brought a drink, and tried to make him forget what she had done by being exceedingly kind and caring. Paul resisted going to bed with her, and left after a few minutes.

"An hour or two later, a lorry parked in the compound and huge men came out to remove everything Paul had bought. In 30 minutes, the house was as clear as if nobody had ever lived in it. Even her cell phone, which she was fond of telling whoever could listen, was the cutest and most modern around, was taken from her under instructions by Paul."

"Everything over and done with just like that after the houseboy's phone call? She sure misjudged his loyalties, didn't she?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"So, in the end," Britney concluded, "Annabelle had to go back to the ghetto, to live with her parents as penniless as she had left them. It was as if she had retired from a brief exposure to sunlight back into a cave of darkness. There is no need to recount the mockeries of her age mates who could not bear the 'luck' she had had, and prayed ardently for a reverse of situation."

"Really? They prayed for her renewed material comfort even if she had to suffer draconian conditions?" asked Lilly Loveless sincerely.

Before Britney could attempt a reply, the young man finally showed up with their drinks and the freshly roasted plums and plantains they ordered, wrapped in an old copy of *The Talking Drum*. Neither Bobinga Iroko nor Prince Anointed would be pleased to see this, Lilly Loveless thought to herself. She was particularly embarrassed when the page her eyes fell on contained a mutilated article captioned: 'Politics and Intellectual Prostitution in Mimboland: Varsity Dons Shame the Ivory Tower'. She would have to procure a copy from Bobinga Iroko or Prince Anointed to read the commentary.

"But we're ready to go now," said Lilly Loveless.

The young man set everything down in front of them on the wobbly wooden table and explained that he had been called off on an errand.

He opened the two bottles quickly before his clients could run off after sitting so long for free and disappeared again himself. They bit into the plums, the first ones of the season, and took a bite of the plantains. The two, eaten together, were very delicious.

* * *

"The next stories are pretty strange," Britney prepared Lilly Loveless. "I'm glad there's no one here to overhear us. You see, there is a Muzungu man who, like most cooperation workers, is neither rich nor poor. The field in which his country had sent him to assist Mimboland was not clear. Nevertheless, one thing was clear to girls of the town where he lived and worked: he was very generous with conquests."

"Good expression," remarked Lilly Loveless. She could almost see the guy splashing everyone with showers of conquest.

"His wife was often going back to Muzunguland, and he was known as a rod that spared no girl. They called him 'frappeur'. He is said to have told a beautiful girl who came looking for work: 'I'm looking for an experienced cleaner with a thorough and practiced broom that can reach out to the hidden and neglected corners of my abode. If you can ensure that and be at the heart of things, then you've got yourself a job. Whatever you do, however excited you get, never call your employer by name.'"

"Sounds like a trap to me," said Lilly Loveless.

"One evening, an upper-sixth high school girl, after initially telling him 'I usually am friends with someone before I go out with them', eventually yielded and followed him to his house. He offered her a drink, and they moved to his room. He kissed her, undressed her and aroused her to the point where she claimed: 'When I'm truly aroused, I'm intoxicated by sensations of love and loving'. But what she expected was not what she got. By their side, the Muzungu's dog was wagging its tail expectantly. When he had laid her on his bed he simply explained that he would concede his place to his dog."

"What!?" Lilly Loveless couldn't believe her ears.

"The girl got up, but the door was locked. The Muzungu held the key. He then started his bargain. He proposed Mim\$ 50,000, the girl refused. 100,000, she still did not want to hear about it. 150,000, 200,000, the girl was stubborn. 250,000, she accepted, reluctantly. It is said, by those who know better, that if she had refused further, he would have menaced her with a gun.

"So she accepted?" Lilly Loveless grimaced.

"Did she have a choice?" asked Britney. "Her party with the Muzungu's dog was filmed, and her money given her. Apparently, the man was fond of filming such practices. He earned a lot of money by sending his recordings to his country, where they were sold to the highest bidder for perverse pleasures."

"My goodness..." sighed Lilly Loveless, not knowing what to make of the saddening story.

"The girl failed her exams that year, but passed it the following year. 'Watat', as students called her - imitating the sound produced by the dog while on her, don't ask me where they got that detail from, - eventually proceeded to the university, apparently in full possession of all her senses, and has since moved on to a normal relationship with a more regular Mboma who brushes aside as rumour everything he hears about her."

Lilly Loveless looked across the street to the market, a bit mesmerized.

* * *

Britney looked around to make sure no one was listening and continued. "Cathy is a pretty girl working with a company in Sawang. She had sworn that she would never have any sentimental dealing with a Muzungu man, because most of them are crooks and evil.

"One day, as she was coming back from work, she felt overwhelmingly tired. She called taxis, proposed even, but none would take her. At last a car, a nice car with a Muzungu man stopped by her side. He invited her to come in, telling her that she looked so tired, and that taxis were

sometimes very naughty. She convinced herself that this one sounded quite different, kind, even. She got into the car."

"Not only tired, but naïve," guessed Lilly Loveless.

"The man dropped her at her parent's house," explained Britney. "She invited him to say hello to her father. Since the man had proposed to take her out for a drink, she went to her room, took a bath and changed her clothes. She then came to the parlour, and told her father that she was going out for a drink. Her father told her to be prudent, and wished her a nice time."

"Just like that?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"What did you expect? Her father to cage her like a bird? A big girl like that, and going out with a Muzungu on top of that?"

"Not that," Lilly Loveless defended herself. "But I'm rather surprised the father did not even ask to know more."

"What more is there to know?" asked Britney. "Don't forget that this is not just a land of Mimbo, it is also a land of snatchers. If you spend time asking questions and seeking answers, lots of things would pass you by. In the world of getting and keeping a man, a certain amount of risk is necessary."

Lilly Loveless jotted down what Britney had just said and her interpretation of it.

"In the car, the Muzungu said it would be good that Cathy knows his house too. He took her to his place. Thirty metres from the main gate, a servant hurriedly opened the door. They got into the house and the man went to get something from his room.

"She felt thirsty. Luckily there was a fridge in the corner. She got up and tried to open it. A little hard at first, it nevertheless gave in. She was shocked out of her wits at what she saw in the fridge. There were heads, female heads with rasta and greffe..."

Lilly Loveless put her hand to her bosom in disbelief. She was lost for words.

"Cathy recollected herself," Britney continued, "and sat on the sofa where she was before standing up. She then had a bright idea. She took out a coin from her purse and left the house. She walked straight to the gateman and told him that his boss had asked her to send him to buy matches.

"The gateman said it was quite unusual, and refused to go. His boss bought matches in carton, not in single little match boxes like a market woman roasting corn by the roadside. Cathy told him that she did not know what was usual or not in their house, but that all she was sure of was that his boss had sent her to him. The man refused again. Cathy went back to the parlour. As she was ascending the stairs, the gateman came up to her, and apologetically took the money and hastened out of the compound."

"As soon as he left, she too ran out of the gate and onto the street in search of a taxi. Just then, the Muzungu man saw her from afar and got into his car to chase her. The gateman realised what was happening, and ran back to open the gate for him. A Godsend taxi came by, and she jumped into it. 'The nearest police station,' she said, struggling to catch her breathe.

"As they arrived, she jumped out of the car, still running, because the Muzungu man was right behind her. She entered the commissioner's secretariat, and asked to see him. They wouldn't let her! She walked to his

door, knocked and opened. The commissioner asked her to wait a minute.

"As she sat in the secretariat the Muzungu man came in. Shunning her, he bribed the secretaries, and got into the office."

"Just like that?" screamed Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, and three minutes later he was out, all smiles."

"And he was allowed to go?"

"When at last it was her turn to be received, Cathy told the commissioner her story. He said that was how things were now, and that she should just go home. She explained that her bag and all her personal documents were there in the Muzungu's house. The commissioner asked her to find a way to go home, assuring that nothing would happen to her. She left hurt, and had to leave for faraway Nyamandem, a more secure town for her. As you can see, men who go after women don't always have the same thing in mind," Britney concluded. "That said, there are lots of more normal Muzungu men with normal ambitions when they attract young Mimbo girls. This man just happened to be weird, and Cathy got the shock of her life."

"Let's get going," said Lilly Loveless. Her head was spinning.

* * *

They hailed a taxi on the busy street in front of the market and rode silently to where Britney's tailor had a big workshop where he made his popular trademarked 'Desired Dresses', with the assistance of several apprentices. As the tailor took her measurements, Lilly Loveless still had her thoughts on Cathy, wondering how the latter was faring after her nightmare experience with the weird Muzungu, her supposed dream come true.

"This tailor is full of funny stories," said Britney to Lilly Loveless, as they left the tailor's crowded workshop. "If he wasn't too busy today, he would have told us a joke or two."

"Do you remember any of his past jokes related to my research?" Lilly Loveless enquired.

"Just two quick ones for now," replied Britney, stopping a taxi.

They got in.

"I'm listening," said Lilly Loveless.

"A man was dying," began Britney. "His wife sat at his bedside. With weakened eyes he looked up and said in a feeble voice: 'I have something I must confess.' 'There's no need to,' his wife replied. 'No,' insisted the man, 'I want to die in peace. I slept with your sister, your best friend, and your mother!' 'I know,' replied the wife, 'now just rest and let the poison work.'"

"Dat man na hélélé. Scratch yi eye show yi pepper," said the Taxi man, when Britney finished.

The second story Britney told in a hurry as the taxi was approaching their stop, and she didn't want to deprive the interested taxi man of the pleasure of hearing the story: "There was this polygamist with five wives and over 100 girlfriends. His wives could not bear their sexual marginalisation any longer. One day they assembled their children and their father, and told the children: 'Ask your father, when was the last time he came to our bedrooms? Even when he comes, it is only to sleep and snore. What is the likely outcome of bees locked out of their hives by illicit harvesters of honey?' With the help of their children, they threatened to castrate their husband, if he didn't change. Their message to him was clear: You are free to give whatever

you want to your lovers, but you are duty bound to fulfil our needs and desires as your wives and the mothers of your children."

"Did he change?" asked Lilly Loveless, a sceptical look on her face.

"I never asked the tailor," replied Britney. "But the man is said to have told a bachelor friend: 'If you sleep at night and sweat, then you can imagine what those of us with wives go through.' Do remind me to ask him when we come back for your clothes," she added, as they came off the taxi.

Lilly Loveless noticed that her cell phone was not with her. She must have left it in the taxi. They screamed for the taxi to stop, but the man did not seem to hear them. They immediately took another taxi to follow, calling her phone as they did, from Britney's phone. After chasing for half a kilometre or so, they lost track of the taxi and gave up.

"The phone is now history," said Britney.

"But it rings when you call it," replied Lilly Loveless, marvelled. "Can't the taxi man just answer the call and allow us to tell him we are chasing him for the phone?"

"You must live in a dreamland," said Britney. "Is that what happens where you come from?"

"What do you mean?"

"Here in Mimboland we thank God for being lucky when we pick something like that. The reasoning is simple: If you really needed it, you wouldn't lose it."

"That's cynical."

"But true. It is the responsibility of the rich to take care of what they value."

"What makes the taxi man think that I am richer than him?"

"Simple. You let go of your phone. If it really mattered to you, it would still be with you as we speak.

"I give up," said Lilly Loveless, angry with herself for not being careful enough. Yet, how could she have thought that an apparently friendly taxi man sharing jokes with them would be a lion in sheepskin with her cell phone? She felt terrible. All her phone numbers were gone, making her feel naked, without ties and vulnerable. She felt as if a vital part of her person had fled.

"I need a new phone right away. Could you take me to a cell phone retailer to buy another?" she pleaded with Britney. "My mom would worry herself to death if she can't reach me by phone."

They boarded another taxi to Global Mobile Connections, the most popular cell phone dealer in town. It was a very big shop with phones and accessories of all shapes and sizes, from the most basic and cheapest to the trendiest and costliest.

To mitigate her frustration for losing her phone, Lilly Loveless decided to ask the proprietor a few questions about his business.

"This is an impressive shop you've got here," she started with a compliment.

"I'm trying my best," replied the shop owner. "There's little to complain about. Business is booming, we thank God."

"So cell phones are very popular?"

"Popular?" he laughed. "They've revolutionised the landscape in Mimboland," he told her. "Since graduating from Mimbo two years ago, I

haven't looked back. All I needed was the initial push by my parents to kick start the business. It took a single trip to Dubai and I was able to triple what my parents lent me, and in less than no time, had paid them back. Today I'm my own boss with three employees..."

"Like someone who interacts on a daily basis with clients and also with cell phone users out there, what can you tell me about cell phone use in Mimboland?"

"My best customers are women. They go for the latest, slickest and most expensive. When I go to Dubai, it is them I seek to please the most. When a man walks in and wants a phone for a woman, I know instantly, just as I know if he is buying for himself, although even men seem to give up on the bigger the better when it comes to cell phones." He laughed as if there was much more to what he said.

Lilly Loveless recalled the words of a politician back home in Muzunguland who declared some years back that the cell phone is one of those rare items for which men are ready to compete on who has got the smallest.

"So tell me what phone I'm going to buy now," Lilly Loveless challenged, teasingly.

"That's easy. You are paying for it yourself, and you are Muzungu, so I swear you'll go for the cheapest Nokia, Motorola or Samsung," he laughed, his fat jaws quivering with underpinning comfort. "That's what amazes me about you the Muzungu. You make all of these things, yet are so frugal and crafty in your consumption of them. We make nothing and we don't have the kind of money Muzungu have, but we settle for kingly consumption of what we can't even repair or maximise use of. If it isn't the most expensive in the world, and if it isn't coming from abroad, we aren't going to touch it. Beggars with the choices of kings, we are!"

"You are right," agreed Lilly Loveless. "I'll go for your cheapest Nokia, not because I don't like a sophisticated phone, but just because all I want is a phone that works, and in any case, I would hate having to lose an expensive phone yet again."

Lilly Loveless paid for the phone, bought a new sim card and airtime, and as one of the shop assistants was busy configuring her new phone under Britney's supervision, she continued her conversation with the shop owner.

"Tell me more about cell phone use here in Puttkamerstown," she urged.

"I don't know the percentage of ownership between men and women, but I can say that most of the women who own phones get them from men, who also feed the phones regularly with airtime. The interesting thing is that usually when you transfer airtime electronically to a lady, you get a very quick call or an SMS from her to thank you for the airtime. Thereafter, you don't hear from her again and the next time she calls you is to tell you that her airtime is finished and she wants to have some more."

"So whom do they call with this airtime? Shouldn't it be for you who have supplied it?"

"That's the question the men are asking."

"Who are these men buying phones and airtime?"

"Boyfriends, husbands, Mbomas... Sometimes somebody gets into a serious crisis with the wife or girlfriend because he has refused to buy her a

phone or to pay for airtime."

"What perceptions of cell phones are popular?"

"The cell phone is considered a luxury and as a tool of prestige, but also as something with much practical value. But because it is expensive to run, you sometimes find people with cell phones who go for months without making a single call. Still they are proud of their phones and usually they want to display it for people to notice that they have a cell phone. Although their bags and pockets are empty and indeed actually safer, people often prefer to carry their phones so others can see and admire or envy them."

"How exactly do they expose these phones?"

"They carry it in their palms or they hang it on their neck. I sell pouches and lots of accessories for that purpose. They display it where it would be very visible for anyone to see. You need to see people at workshops, conferences, churches and other public occasions, refusing to switch off their phones. Sometimes in church, phones interrupt prayers with funny ring tones, despite notices pasted all over asking members of the congregation to switch off their cell phones. Just last Sunday, my pastor asked if those who leave their phones on during service are desperately waiting for an urgent call from Satan. Women are particularly guilty. When they are not busy displaying their phones for others to admire, they leave them on and put them deep inside their handbags such that before they get to take the call, they have disturbed almost everybody around. People hardly respect notices and instructions telling them to put off their cell phones. To them, it is like being asked to switch off one's ambitions for prestige and social status."

"What do you have to tell me about ring tones?"

"Ring tones have gone wild these days, and tastes vary as much as human character. In general though, people prefer tones that are melodious, that are music, not simply signals. Once they buy their phones, they usually ask us or technicians to give them a rich variety of ring tones that they think are attractive and unique. If they get their fancy ring tones, sometimes they like to put the ring tones very high and to let the phone ring for long to attract passers-by to know that they are receiving a call. You have to be important and well connected to receive a call, you know?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I remember when cell phones were still relatively new, students would arrange with others to beep them in lecture halls so they could pretend to be receiving important calls from family or friends abroad."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Also, when there were not that many ring tones to choose from and everyone wanted the privilege of receiving a call, there was much anxiety when the phone rang in a public place. The tendency was for everyone to rush for their phones. Even today, women especially are always very anxious, as if they sit in permanent expectation of the phone ringing. They rush to unzip their bags and remove their cell phones even before they've ascertained that it is their ring tone. In certain instances, some people carry several phones by different service providers on them. You need to see them totally confused when one rings, worse still, if several ring at the same time."

"That's funny," Lilly Loveless giggled, visualising someone totally wired up, vibrating with a cacophony of ring tones. "So the phones are hardly

on silent even when they have a silent feature?"

"No. Most people do not even know that the silent thing is there, and those who do don't care to use it, because to them when you receive a phone silently people do not know that you are around, and what is the point of being important, around and silent?"

"You are too critical for a businessman and dealer in cell phones," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"I went into business to survive, but my heart is with sociology," said the proprietor. "When I've made enough money, I intend to go to Muzunguland for further studies."

"So you want to fall bush?"

"You know about bushfalling?"

"Britney has told me all about it."

"It is the latest Gospel in town. Everyone is craving to fall bush. We believe in bushfalling, and are proud to be referred to not by name, but simply as bushfallers."

"How interesting," remarked Lilly Loveless, her mind not wanting to let go of the central theme of cell phones. "How many cell phones do you have personally?"

"I sell them, so I can have as many as I fancy. There are some with room for two or more sim cards, others with possibility for Internet, digital camera, word processing, graphics, games, Bluetooth, and so on. In general however, most people prefer to have two cell phones, since we have two main network service providers. They have one for this provider and a second for the other. This is understandable as both networks are hardly working well simultaneously, but I am sure people would still have two phones even if the networks were healthy all year round, just so others know that they can possess two phones. In some rare occasions, people who travel a lot and between countries could have a phone for each country, rather than having to juggle sim cards each time they travel."

"I understand that many people prefer phones from whitemankontri, is that true?"

"We Mimbolanders believe a lot in what comes from outside. Those of us who receive calls from whitemankontri like to dramatise the fact. Since most of the calls from abroad do not display the numbers of the callers, fraudsters use that feature to dupe lots of people locally, claiming that they are calling from Muzunguland, China, Dubai or elsewhere abroad. Due to the economic crisis we face here, many people tend to want to fall bush because they feel that once you are out there you will make it. Sometimes people with phones get very frustrated with calls from abroad, especially when these calls do not come along with promises of expected goodies. Most elderly people here link up and meet their children abroad thanks to cell phones. Remittances are negotiated and transferred thanks to cell phones, and bushfallers and their relatives or friends here at home can follow the transfer minute by minute, drawing the attention of one another to any hitches in the process."

Lilly Loveless intensified her note taking. She liked what she was hearing. This interview was worth the lost phone, she thought. "Any negative side to the cell phone?" she asked.

"The cell phone has its good and bad sides. Most unscrupulous

people have used the cell phone to wreak havoc, just as some have used the phone to keep peace and deter crime. For young girls, they are mostly using the cell phone as a tool to grab things left and right, and also, to make themselves available for grabbing. When a woman gives you her phone number, she is actually giving you access to herself, and also as a way to pester you to send them airtime, this and that."

"How common is the beeping or flashing you mentioned a while ago?"

"When someone beeps me, I will never respond if I don't know them. My phone is strictly for business and important issues. I sometimes play with it, and may beep somebody once or twice only to attract their attention. The cell phone is still very expensive for Mimbolanders to manage. Even though the price per unit set is manageable, the airtime is still very expensive. Most people also feel that those abroad have easy access to cell phones. Usually, when you have relatives or friends abroad, you would want to request a cell phone from them. So most people have cell phones from abroad as gifts, and the tendency is to believe that those phones are superior to what we have locally, but that's not true, as you yourself can see from the stock I have here..."

At the end of their conversation, Lilly Loveless thanked the proprietor and his assistant, and left in a taxi, which dropped Britney off at her place, and continued with her further down the windy seven kilometres long road popularly known as the Anaconda Street.

* * *

Later that evening Lilly Loveless caught up with Bobinga Iroko at Mountain Valley to show him her new phone.

"Thanks for the bush meat," a young man told Bobinga Iroko, emptying his glass of beer and licking his fingers.

"It's the least I can do for a bushman," said Bobinga Iroko, as the young man stood up to leave. "Make sure your report on the attempted arson on the Mimbo Forest Conservation Project building is on my table first thing in the morning," he added.

"Others are bushfallers, he is a bushmeater," Bobinga Iroko told Lilly Loveless as she took a seat.

"What is bush meat?" asked Lilly Loveless, beckoning at the waitress to bring her the usual.

"Don't tell me you haven't eaten bush meat yet," Bobinga Iroko raised his eyebrows.

"What I see I eat, what I don't see I don't eat."

"Do you mean you wouldn't eat if you were blind?"

"Why can't you just answer simple straightforward questions straightforwardly?"

Bobinga Iroko laughed, and with his eyes closed, said: "'I see,' said the blind lady, sitting at the corner of a round table to place her order for Achu with yellow soup and red bush meat."

"And what is bush meat, for the blind and the sighted?"

"OK, bush meat is meat that hunters bring back from the bush," said Bobinga Iroko. "That's as straightforward as I can get," he added, with a laugh.

"How popular is hunting around here?"

"I don't know about around here, but where I used to come from until I got stuck in the city and its zero sum games someone who comes home with a leopard, a lion, an elephant or even an antelope is hailed and honoured with a red feather by the village chief."

Lilly Loveless wondered the extent to which this was still true, although she came short of asking Bobinga Iroko if people really hunt these days even in the villages. Instead, she asked: "Is bushmeating similar to bushfalling?"

"Have you fallen for a bushfaller?" Bobinga Iroko laughed in his usual jovial and jocular manner.

"Do you have a good looking, hardworking, long fingered smily, intelligent, bushfaller who laughs like you?"

"I'll arrange for a perfect clone," said Bobinga Iroko. "Bushfalling is like real hunting, which doesn't take place in your backyard," he added.

"What do you mean?"

"If you go hunting in your backyard, what you are most likely to catch is a neighbour's goat or fowl, in which case you are branded a thief and disciplined accordingly."

"If I understand you correctly, real bushfalling is that which takes you to a distant bush, and from which you bring back real game," said Lilly Loveless, taking out her notebook.

"Correct."

The waitress returned with a Mimbo-Wanda for Lilly Loveless, who filled her glass and said "cheers" to Bobinga Iroko. After a gulp, she opened her handbag and showed Bobinga Iroko her new cell phone, followed by a story of how she lost the old one.

Bobinga Iroko gave her a lecture on cell phones as instruments of exploitation.

"With the cell phone, men and women are able to schedule and reschedule appointments, and sideline the person they do not want at a particular moment," he told her.

"Also, the cell phone makes it easy for people to tell lies. Somebody would tell you, 'I'm in the house' when the person is in Mountain Valley having a nice time with your best friend. 'I'm coming in ten minutes', when he is actually going away from you. Some would say: 'Where are you?', and you could easily reply: 'Where would you like me to be?'"

"Let me understand you correctly," said Lilly Loveless, taking out her notebook. "You mean the cell phone makes it possible for people to want you to be where they want or where they don't want?"

"Absolutely," agreed Bobinga Iroko. "So it is very deceitful, at times. But again, it is also very useful in that, for those who know time management, instead of travelling for kilometres for an appointment or to send a message, you just tell the person that you will not be coming because that saves a lot of time and money. Creative in their use of the cell phone though they are in some ways, Mimbolanders are yet to master the cell phone as an instrument of expediency and purposeful communication."

"That's the same thing the proprietor of the cell phone shop said."

"Which means it must be true, right?" Bobinga Iroko laughed, faking mockery. "The cell phone has also proved very useful in rigging elections

because the rigging of elections is the favourite pastime of our politicians," he added.

"I can well imagine how handy the cell phone could be to a polling official in the service of a government economical with democracy," agreed Lilly Loveless.

"And not to forget using the cell phone to eliminate critics, subversives and political opponents," added Bobinga Iroko.

"How do they do it? By planting a bomb in your cell phone? Or is it by calling you up and telling you to drop dead or else...?" asked Lilly Loveless, half teasingly.

"It is no laughing matter," Bobinga Iroko rebuked without sounding it. "We lost many a prominent son and daughter of this country through cell phone assassinations. Someone calls you up pretending to be interested in something else but actually seeking to identify your location so that it can be communicated to their squads of hired killers. Before you know it, someone has died mysteriously from a car accident, poisoning, break-in and assault by armed robbers, matters of the heart, etc..."

"I see," said Lilly Loveless, after noting down in her notebook. "In your own work as a journalist, how has the cell phone influenced things?"

"Good question," said Bobinga Iroko. "There is a very marked difference. Before the advent of the cell phone, we were using just the fixed phone, of which there were not that many. With the coming of the cell phone everything has been revolutionised. You are able to crosscheck information easily. The process of gathering news has been facilitated immensely by the cell phone, which has also enabled us to balance our reports. Initially, you get one side of the story, and even if you can't get the other side for want of mobility, you know all you need to do is get in touch with somebody who has the number of the person who has the other side of the story and then you crosscheck. So the cell phone has done a lot of good to the media even though it has also done a lot of harm."

"In what way has it done harm?"

"People take liberties with the cell phone. I for one am exploited."

"You, Bobinga Iroko, exploited? How?"

"If an event is happening around here, those from other news agencies in Mimboland, Muzunguland or elsewhere, have the habit of calling me up for information, and I find myself being a correspondent for news organs that have not placed me on any salary or a stringer's fee, but that are simply taking advantage of our *esprit de corps*."

"I see."

"Criminals have also used the cell phone to facilitate crime. I remember last year when I had to travel with a friend during the Ramadan period to Pawa-Town and at some point I said I didn't want to travel any longer because of the long delay we had at the motor park. Only my friend travelled, and they were robbed by armed robbers somewhere on the highway. The robbers were looking for somebody light in complexion, with sideburns and a twinkle in his eyes, and wearing a black shirt. This could only mean that somehow the people at the motor park had communicated through cell phones or through SMS to these robbers with the identity of this person and with an indication of how much money was on him, so they could pick him up and force him at gunpoint to hand over the money."

"Then there is also the issue of the use of anonymous calls when you write a story that is critical of somebody, he or she calls you anonymously to warn or threaten you, so that you have the impression that you are being trailed, and that at any moment something could happen to you. On many occasions I have received calls like that insulting me about a particular report although once in a while I also get calls congratulating me. But the insulting and threatening calls do not leave even the daredevils of our profession indifferent. So the cell phone to the best of my knowledge is a necessary evil."

"You are a courageous man with a big heart."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"What do you think?"

"Is it for me to think what you intend?"

"Difficult as ever, Bobinga Iroko... have you ever considered changing your name to 'Bobinga Iroko the Difficult'?"

"What is there to be gained?"

"A cell phone with a number only one person has besides Bobinga Iroko."

"And who might that person be?"

"Britney taught me about beeping or flashing a while ago, but how come you didn't reply when I beeped or flashed you to announce my new cell number?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Normally beepers and flashers are low income people and generally women consider themselves to be low income so they beep even when they have far more than the men," Bobinga Iroko feigned tongue-in-cheekness. "I don't tolerate beeping or flashing," he added. "I only communicate with people whose numbers I have and with whom I have a prior appointment."

"That must be terrible for an investigative journalist," criticised Lilly Loveless.

"I have an official phone for official business," Bobinga Iroko defended himself. "And that number is very well known and regularly featured in the front page of *The Talking Drum*. With that number, I can do anything, but my private number is my private number. I have no patience with the abusive and reckless traffic in personal phone numbers by people who have no business giving out a number that was shared with them in confidence."

"I see," said Lilly Loveless.

"And with my private number, if I receive a beep, it doesn't matter who is there, if I don't know you I will never respond. You know how many people out there are just seeking for notice? So because I didn't recognise your new number, I couldn't avail myself to your beeps and flashes."

"Message understood," said Lilly Loveless. "And now that you've got my new number, do react when next I flash."

"It depends what mood I am in," replied Bobinga Iroko, a mischievous smile perching playfully on his face.

'Hitch a colourful ride through the Garden of Eden with or without Eve' – was the welcoming sign proudly displayed at the entrance of Lillies of the Valley, a tropical paradise situated a few kilometres outside Puttkamerstown, on the way to Sawang. Amaryllis lilies, pink hibiscus, climbing roses, poinsettias and many other goodies were on the shelves of this most natural of tropical gardens where everything grows and glows with a beauty simply out of this world. Even the birds in their multicoloured multitudes took time to sing their songs and to listen to the songs of others, creating thereby a special kind of music to celebrate the joy of being in tune with the world around them. Initially meant as a modest contribution to the fight against the rape of the rainforest turning an environmental disaster into a catastrophe, Lillies of the Valley had grown to fulfil other desires.

Lilly Loveless felt herself in heaven. She followed the gardener around his nursery as he pointed out the varieties and shared with her their local names. For once it was Britney who was running late and Lilly Loveless didn't mind in the slightest. They had agreed to meet here, not for the flowers or the birds, but because of the resting house tucked discreetly away behind a long wall covered by purple bougainvillea. Someone had said it was particularly busy during the day in a discrete sort of way, and Lilly Loveless had felt it would be fun to sit here strategically and work away while at the same time observing all the movement in and out of the place by people dying to rest.

Hopefully they could get some work done without being distracted by side issues like they would be in places where there were seen often, like at Mountain View or Mountain Valley.

Britney arrived late. "Oh, there you are, Lilly. Sorry to keep you waiting. I was visiting my aunt in the hospital. She is the one with whom we stayed at Sakersbeach."

"What is the matter with her? I hope nothing serious," Lilly Loveless looked worried.

"Her husband's problems with his boss have grown worse, and she can't take it any longer. The stress is too much for her. Two days ago she just collapsed and was rushed to the hospital," Britney explained.

"How sad," Lilly Loveless said, shaking her head sympathetically. "How is her situation?"

"She is on drips and the doctor says her situation is stable, but he wants to monitor her for a few days before sending her back home."

"Please give her my regards when you visit her again, and do let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"Thanks. I will," said Britney, adding: "Welcome to Lilies of the Valley resting house. Should we go in and get started?"

The gardener looked at the two curiously.

Then, before they slipped through his fingers, he said, "If your name na Lily, like dat one talk, you no go weed no lily." Lilly Loveless didn't understand much but she was free to read her own meaning into what was said, when he went to cut flowers and returned with two elegant glorisas, one

for the one and one for the other. The glorisas were magnificent. Lilly Loveless and Britney tucked the stems behind their ears, letting the deep orange hues adorn their coiffures. There's no better artist than nature itself, thought Lilly Loveless as they disappeared into the bougainvillea.

The gardener was a little reluctant to let go of what he'd thought was going to be a big sale. At the same time, he was used to people passing by his flora with a mere glance for pleasures in the pains found beyond.

Judging by the quality of the wrought iron and wooden tables in the foyer and by the paintings on the walls and the grandfather clock that sounded its bell at the top of every hour, Lilly Loveless guessed that Lilies of the Valley served somewhat upscale clients. She and Britney chose a table away from the reception cum bar, toward the back and off to the side, so they could follow movement through the front door by potential resters seeking the quiet time of day. They were expecting things to pick up in an hour or so when people would flood in for their lunchtime quickies and snacks.

"What can I get for you two?" asked a young woman, putting a plate of groundnuts and another of green olives on the table. She was dressed for the place, in a black V-neck top and a necklace with a love sign that dangled into her cleavage. They ordered their regular drinks and got to work, their eyes actively alert.

* * *

"Mr and Mrs George had lived in Muzunguland for almost 15 years," began Britney, in a hushed voice so it wouldn't carry in the room. "When they finally returned home, Mr George was trapped by the concubine syndrome. They were resident around the Mountain View area and his concubine was around the University Junction. This concubine became a very notorious one, and Mr George spent almost all of his time in her house. At first, when his wife questioned him about the concubine, he refused all allegations. He would drive his car and park at least one hundred metres away from the concubine's house. After several attacks at home by his spouse, he decided to be parking his car directly in front of the concubine's house. It was no more a 'hide and seek' relationship.

"Eventually, his wife got all information and decided to act. One day, she met him in his concubine's house. She asked her husband: 'Can you tell me who this woman is to you?'

"Her husband replied: 'She is your mate.'

"Mrs George asked: 'You prefer her to me? Because her breasts are bigger?'

"Well, come to think of it, so are her buttocks.'

"Mrs George stormed out of the room saying, 'Why don't you go ahead and measure her heart too, and find out just how big her empty heart is.'

"After this, Mrs George started to insult her husband's concubine by saying, 'So, you're the one depriving me of my husband?' The concubine retorted: 'Aren't you happy I'm helping you to care for him? There is something you never offered him that I did, so what is your problem?'

"Mrs George immediately caught the concubine and got her well beaten in front of the husband, whose reaction was to go home immediately, search for his wife's academic certificates and set them on fire. When Mrs

George arrived home, she saw some papers on fire from a distance. Little did she know that these were her certificates on fire. When she realised, she collapsed and was rushed to the hospital. Discharged, she took the matter to court and eventually left the house. The case has not yet been judged, but given that courts of justice across Mimboland have yet to be acknowledged as bastions of justice for the strong of spirit, how can we be sure that things will go her way? Meanwhile, Mr George and the concubine are still going out, neither married officially nor living together."

"Can you imagine," said Lilly Loveless. "That was pretty vicious of him."

"Sure was," agreed Britney. "After I learned about it, I took my certificates to date to a cybercafé and had them all scanned, and then stored them on Gmail."

"R-r-really?" asked Lilly Loveless, a bit surprised by her creative appropriation of new technologies.

"Haven't you heard of the bird which says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, I have learnt to fly without perching?"

"Where does it say that?"

"In Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, I think."

"So you are taking advantage of new technologies to be a step ahead of everyone in a society where steps are increasingly unpredictable?"

"I couldn't have said it better."

"That's smart, very smart."

"Let me tell you about another couple," said Britney.

* * *

"Mr and Mrs Williams were sort of married. It wasn't a formal marriage in the strict sense of the word, as there was no marriage certificate. It was a 'come-we-stay' sort of marriage, which to Mrs Williams was better than nothing, as it saved her the embarrassment of questions such as: 'Why aren't you married? Why don't you have children? Was it a choice you made?' In this process of cohabitation, they were blessed with five children after eleven years. Whenever Mrs Williams talked about establishing a marriage certificate, Mr Williams would say 'a certificate is just a paper that can be destroyed at any moment, so it is not important. The essential thing to keep in mind is that you are mine forever.'

"She waited to no avail.

"Suddenly one day, Mr Williams fell in love with a nurse. He started spending most of his time with the nurse and neglected his partner at home with the children. It was rather fortunate that Mrs Williams was a civil servant, so she was able to manage her home to her possible best with her salary.

"Two years ago, Mr Williams became seriously sick and it was alleged that he had AIDS. He would cough a terrible cough that made people advise him to write his will. A majority of the people were convinced he would die. During this period, his girlfriend was pregnant. It was his wife who took care of him from hospital to hospital and from one traditional healer to another. It came to a point when he was incontinent. His partner was beside him. This went on for six months. The girlfriend did not make any attempt to cater for him. Instead, she did not want people at that time to

identify her with the man, because of his alleged AIDS.

"Fortunately for the man, he was treated or at least his situation improved in the Sawang General Hospital.

"When he was discharged, instead of reconciling with his partner who took care of him, he went back to the nurse and their love became even stronger than before."

"Wow" said Lilly Loveless under her breath, continuing to take notes. "What ingratitude!"

"After the first child with his girlfriend," Britney went on, "they're now on the second. Rumour is circulating that they are officially married since the nurse has presented a marriage certificate at her jobsite to benefit from the allowances and tax exemptions due to those who are married. Mrs Williams is aware of this and has been so shocked by it that she has now become a street drunkard. According to her, drinking is her only consolation and she has also decided to bleach her skin and become what is known locally as 'Fanta-Coke', meaning light in patches, dark in others.

"Sad situation," mentioned Lilly Loveless. She found the reaction somewhat extreme, given the fact the man was wayward from the outset. Didn't she see it coming? If they were deeply in love maybe this would make sense. Not wanting to set Britney on a speculation trajectory, Lilly Loveless simply noted her concerns in her notebook. She glanced at the young woman who had served them, who had nothing better to do than stare over at them suspiciously.

The young woman was distracted thankfully when she had to take payment from a gentleman who had just arrived with a deep black beauty, about half his age – he looked in his 50s. As he headed up the stairs, Lilly and Britney heard him say, 'Inter-resting,' and out of the corners of their eyes saw him fondling already the beauty's derriere as he added, 'Can't wait to rest inside your resting place.'

* * *

"I've one last one for you today, about a couple pulled together in the beginning, but who now are poles apart" insisted Britney. "Maurice, a married man, had struggled in life to be what he is. As starting and parting go, he had a string of girlfriends and children before he got married. Everybody who knew him was surprised when he got married, and doubted if the union would last. The girl he married was very beautiful, calm and reserved. She was a civil servant. Before marriage, he proved to be a very faithful and loving partner. On the same day the marriage was contracted, he slept out.

"Really?!" exclaimed Lilly Loveless.

"When he discovered that his wife was pregnant he told her to her face: 'You don't expect me to eat plantains daily, moreover, I don't want to disturb you.' This must have taken his wife quite by surprise, as she didn't even know he loved plantains. He has never really demonstrated any particular appetite when she serves him her plantains."

"What manner of husband was he then?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"He always entered his house from midnight and the first thing he would do was to get into the bathroom and wash his male organ without caring if his wife was seeing him."

Why didn't the fool wash at his girlfriend's house? Lilly Loveless grimaced and continued taking notes.

"He would invite his girlfriends to his house and would tell his wife that they were relatives. Then at night, he would quietly open the girl's room and sleep there, without his wife being aware. Whenever his wife complained he would say: 'I have made love to more than 3000 girls, so what manner of woman is there that I am yet to see for you to keep suspecting me?' He managed to have three children with his wife but did not know that these children needed clothing, and medication, or whatever, not to mention school books. Whenever this woman complained, the answer was a severe beating. At times he would tell her: 'Are you not happy that you are in a house where there is television and a satellite dish? Does your father have one?'"

"Oh, that's low," said Lilly Loveless. "I hate domestic violence. No man who brutalizes women is worth a man in my eyes."

Britney wet her lips with the Pamplmouse pop and continued. "Whenever this man received his salary, his wife only knew because he would always come home drunk. He once told his wife: 'You have no right to know what I earn and how I spend my money.' When he entered a bar, he kicked everybody's drink and asked the barman or lady to give each of them two or three rounds on him. This earned him the name 'papa yeye Mimboman.'"

"Unfortunately for him, he was thrown out of his job for repeatedly coming drunk to work, sexually harassing female colleagues, and for reckless drinking at lunch breaks. The little money he was paid, instead of taking it home to meet his wife and chill her heart, he lavished it on girlfriends and fellow drunks, and when this money got finished, that is when his wife knew that her husband had lost his job.

"Now he has no friend, he is very wretched and frustrated. When his former girlfriends see him passing they hide because of the miserable condition in which this man is. They can't believe he once was close enough to touch and feel them."

"I bet he could write a bestseller on fair-weather friendship," Lilly Loveless interjected.

"His wife says that her husband now calls her 'ma Cherie,'" words she last heard when they were newly married, and he was still able to stand her plantains."

It was already 5pm and activity at Lilies of the Valley had picked up remarkably. Scores had come, come and left, and many more were on their way coming. That was the real business of Lilies of the Valley, not the flowers which appeared to be resting themselves, as few of the clients even noticed them, let alone disturb them by making an offer to the gardener who never tired of expecting what seldom came.

"They are coming to rest," remarked Lilly Loveless, referring to a man and girl who had just walked straight in to the reception.

"Yes, they look very tired. I think they should go and lie down," replied Britney.

The man and the girl seemed to have started their love game way back in the car or wherever they were coming from, and were in dying need to quench their thirst of desire. The receptionist, who was not fast enough, was scolded by the man who screamed: "Just give me the bloody key and do

the paper work later.”

Lilly Loveless and Britney decided to call it a day. On the way out, Lilly Loveless bought freshly cut dahlias by the gardener who had been so kind, and who couldn't believe his luck that someone should actually buy some flowers. It was his experience with Mimboland, that everyone who came by either did not see flowers as something special or claimed to have a hedge or garden of flowers of their own. It needed a Muzungu woman, he thought, to appreciate and reward, however modest, his job and work as nature's gardener.

“I hope your aunt gets to feeling better soon,” said Lilly Loveless as she was about to take her taxi. She gave Britney a kiss on the lips: “That's how we say ‘see you again’ in Muzunguland,” she said, got into her taxi and drove off.

Britney took a taxi to her favourite Internet café. There was no mail for her, but she had one to send. “Providence, my dear,” she wrote. “I have been down for almost 5 days now. I consulted at the Mount Rebecca Hospital, did some lab tests and the results showed that I had malaria and typhoid. I was given a bottle of drip and lots of tablets that I am on now. Added to this my gastritis got worse and I have become very nauseated, have no appetite and serious headache. If you were around, I could think perhaps I'm pregnant, but you are not, so I can't be. There is so much to talk about but I have no strength to write a long letter. I will when I recover. I love you so much and miss you even more. Kisses, Britney.”

Britney had to travel to a town near Zintgraffstown for an urgent family matter which Providence, her fiancé in Muzunguland had asked her to do for him. She had received a parcel which Providence sent through a bushfaller returning home. In the parcel was a cell phone and some money which Providence wanted her to deliver to his mom. She was also instructed to use some of the money to buy a sim card and airtime for the phone, and to teach Providence's mother, who was marginally literate, how to operate the phone. Britney saw in this mission a good opportunity to endear herself further with her mother-in-law to be. She knew only well enough that the way to a peaceful life with your husband is through his mother.

It was a long journey but a short stay, as she had to be back the next day. Lilly Loveless decided to go along for the ride and the work they could accomplish on the way there. They left early for the Puttkamerstown central bus station, and were fortunate to have seats in the first bus with Dreamland Express Voyages. Even then, it took some two hours before the bus could take off, during which time Britney and Lilly Loveless, together with the other passengers already in the bus, were subjected to a frenzy of salesmanship from hawkers. There was one selling 'Super Clean International' which she claimed could take out even the most stubborn of stains, but with which she failed woefully to take chewing gum off one of the seats. The funniest of them introduced himself: 'If you no di ever buy foolish you no fit ever buy sense'. He was selling roots, herbs, the bark of trees, and many other traditional medicines. He started by condemning Muzungu medicine as 'high quality nonsense' and called on the passengers to sample his medicines: kanda for planti to cure migrating anus; king seed to say farewell to tonsillitis which he termed Hausa sick; shiny-shiny for discoloured teeth; swaa- pepe to bring typhoid, bele-bite and shit-hole-blok to their knees; and finally dis-man-na-hélélé, which he claimed had found the ultimate solution to the embarrassment felt by men when asked by a woman: 'Na all you dis?' Many passengers bought different medicines.

Lilly Loveless and Britney remained indifferent until the man suggested pointedly: "Don't you two beautiful ladies want your men to stop apologising all the time: 'na all me dat'?"

Laughing, Lilly Loveless said, "Give us two packets."

"What do you want it for?" Britney eyed her curiously.

"For Bobinga Iroko, as a present," Lilly Loveless laughed even louder.

Just then, the driver mounted the bus, and the same funny hawker led a prayer for a safe journey, before leaving the bus in peace.

Britney and Lilly Loveless were seated in the middle of the bus. Britney was happy to see that people around them after only an hour into the journey were already falling asleep or engrossed in the Jackie Chan movie being projected from the small screen at the front of the bus. She and Lilly Loveless could do some work without anyone raising their eyebrows. "Just two women chatting away the way only women like to do," they'd think.

Elbowing Lilly Loveless who seemed ready to join the sleepers, Britney asked her for the recorder. Lilly Loveless found it after a few minutes

of fumbling through her bag – that seemed oversized compared to the flat brown leather shoulder bag Britney had packed with all she'd need for a day.

* * *

Pressing record, Britney began, "I had a friend with whom I attended secondary school. When she failed the GCE A Levels for the first time, her father abandoned her. Her mother could not sponsor her because she was doing nothing to earn an income. Her elder brother and sister who were already working were also very irresponsible.

"This friend turned to me and said: 'Britney, I have decided to go back to school on my own.' When I asked how she would manage that, she replied: 'After all, I am a woman and above all, I am beautiful, so I will ask a few boyfriends I have around to take care of me.'"

Britney glanced at Lilly Loveless and realized she didn't have her notebook out. When prompted, Lilly Loveless pulled it from her bag along with a pen and opened the notebook to the first blank page. Feeling reassured, Britney continued.

"Since I knew that such behaviour is characteristic of their family, I told her to decide for herself and that she should at least consult her mother.

"She had now decided to have boyfriends all over the country and consequently became a tourist. Come the start of the academic year in September, she would tour all the eleven regions of Mimboland to look for these men for each of them to give his quota of the fee and maintenance allowance she needed for school. The problem here was that each of these men thought he was her only boyfriend. On the other hand she knew within her that none of these men possessed her."

Britney glanced at Lilly Loveless again. Was she listening or looking out the window at the forest? Upon seeing a few notes scribbled, she continued.

"This friend played around like that for seven years. She attended all evening classes but to no avail. One year she decided to attend an evening school in Puttkamerstown. Unfortunately for her, eight of her boyfriends were transferred to Puttkamerstown. Since each of them thought he was the patron, they looked for her place and found it." Britney paused. She had the feeling she was talking to herself.

"Don't you want to know what is going to happen next?" Britney asked Lilly Loveless, who nodded unconvincingly.

Britney continued all the same. "Well, now problems started. Every day there was 'traffic jam' in her place and most of the time this friend was given serious beatings by the men who felt entitled to her.

"I advised her to send away all these men but she said: 'Friend, if you give me such advice then how do you expect me to live? What I'm planning to do is to look for a new house in a hidden corner and show it only to one boyfriend who cares the most.' But before she could realise her plans, all of them had disappeared. This is because most of them were members of the Puttkamerstown club and whenever they met, each of them talked about his beautiful friend. Before long, they all discovered that they were talking about the same girl and they all realised that whenever they invited this girl out for a drink she turned down the request, probably for fear of meeting another boyfriend somewhere."

Lilly Loveless was now actively taking down notes, which encouraged Britney to continue.

"When they all finally left her, this friend mourned for almost three months. She told me: 'Friend, I've decided now never to love, else I'd die before my parents. I've seen that I don't have luck because most of my friends are succeeding with this type of lifestyle without problem.'

"At this point, most of us friends contributed to her sustenance and after ten years of writing the A Levels she finally made it. She is now reading her last year of law at the University of Asieyam in Nyamandem."

"Really?!" launched Lilly Loveless.

"There are cases similar to hers that have left a bitter taste in the mouth of many a man," said Britney, passing Lilly Loveless a newspaper clipping she brought along.

"What is it?" asked Lilly Loveless, taking the paper.

"It is a newspaper article that appeared in yesterday's *The Talking Drum*. I brought this along just in case Bobinga Iroko has not given you a complimentary copy yet. It is by a man complaining how girls at University of Mimbo treat men. He accuses us of not being cheerful givers, of feigning love, playing hard to get yet and having a delicate taste for money. We are gold diggers, he says."

Lilly Loveless sat up, but not feeling up to reading the article herself, she asked Britney to recount the story and read sections to her.

Britney accepted. "UM, the author claimed, was much less a place to be than a place to be fleeced. The man complains about the UM girl whom he writes: 'She beeps me and does not turn up. When I call her, she does not turn up. When I least expect her, she pops up like a genie. And her buttocks do not touch the chair long enough for me to blink.'"

"I like that," said Lilly Loveless.

"According to him, the girl is always excusing herself out of appointments with him: 'I am very tired, I am just coming from school,' is her vintage excuse. 'I must go and rest.' And like lightning, she flashes off with a soft drink, fish, chicken or whatever thing she can help herself to at their place of rendezvous. This bill, of course, is paid by him, which is something he resents bitterly."

"And what does he do?" asked Lilly Loveless. "Does he move on?"

"He refuses to yield to defeat: 'When shall I see you next?' he calls after her. But she is already hurrying away with what he terms 'her booty'. He recounts how last weekend when he left work, he drove around looking for a place to cool off with a frothing bottle. He went to his favourite spot and sat there long enough to be bored. Then he called the girl whose line sounded busy. Soon after that his cell phone beeped. 'Beepers,' he murmured and dialled the beeper. The following conversation between the two of them is very interesting:

'Hello, are you the chairman of MIMBEEP?' he said into the phone.

'Yes...er... no! What do you mean MIMBEEP?' the voice at the other end asked.

'The Mimbo Association of Beepers,' replied the man, 'because you hardly call me; you only beep even after I have sent you air time.'

'Weh, I ran out of airtime,' apologises the voice.

'What? I last sent you airtime for MIM\$5000 and you did not have the

courtesy even to say thank you? God forbid!

'Weh, see, I have got something to tell you,' the voice changed the subject.

'And what can that be?'

'I can't discuss it over the phone.'

'All right then, meet me at the watering hole.'

'Watering hole?'

'Not the kind of hole you are thinking of. Come to the usual joint.'

'OK, I'll be there at once.'

The man thinks the girl was calling from a nearby callbox, for barely had he replaced the phone when she appeared. Like a genie, a deceptive smile on her face. She went straight to the point.

'You know, I am the chairperson of our alma mater and we are having a party tomorrow...'

'How does that concern me?' I asked.

'I must fix my hair at Lulu Coiffure.'

'Your hair? At Lulu's?', the man scratched his chin.

'A student's allowance isn't much, you know, just in case you have forgotten, I am a mere student. So, just give me money to fix my hair,' the girl put her case with so much ease that the man had to exercise considerable constraint to stop himself from dipping his hand in his pocket.

According to the guy, she was sitting there on the edge of the chair with one eye on his wallet, he knew, and the other eye on the lookout for other boyfriends who might notice her in another man's company. He said it was hard to put his mind off the luscious body sitting beside him even though it had become a feat to get into her underwear.

'I can only give you the money tomorrow,' he told her.

'Tomorrow? Why tomorrow? What is wrong with here and now?' the girl looked dejected. She got to her feet immediately and said, 'Can I take something?'

'Suit yourself,' the man conceded.

She went into the bar and packed a king-size Coca Cola, three pieces of chicken and a pile of bush meat into a plastic bag.

'Bye,' she said at the entrance, 'don't forget, tomorrow.'

'I already have,' he told himself, contemplating his additional bill of Mim\$3000, for what she had taken, enough to do her hair twice over.

'That one was fishy,' said a friend as the girl disappeared.

'More than fishy, she is an oiled eel.'

'She is an 18-carat nibbler,' said the man, disappointed. 'Now, I understand why they call them UMice and UMisers.'

Even then, the man isn't ready to give up until he has got what he considers his just desserts: 'It won't be long before I cut her down to size,' he resolves."

"What can one say, but to wish him luck?" said Lilly Loveless.

Britney just smiled, content to get some reaction, however short, from Lilly Loveless. She continued with her next story, without even pressing pause, kind of the way the driver avoided the brakes in favour of the accelerator.

"Dereck got married to my neighbour's daughter. After a few years together, it was discovered this man loved only his wife's money. As for his wife, she thought her husband was the best in the world. Dereck persuaded his wife and they bought a plot and built a house. Immediately after this, he looked for a young university girl and was deeply in love with her. He made sure that he controlled his wife's salary and even gave part of it to his girlfriend. He became more aggressive towards his wife and asked her to leave his house," Lilly paused in expectation of a reaction from Lilly Loveless, but when this didn't come, she continued. "Can you imagine?" Britney asked Lilly Loveless, "Chase his wife from the very house they built with her money? Doesn't it seem a bit much to you?"

Lilly Loveless nodded and Britney continued.

"His wife told him that she would rather prefer they both leave the house because it was their joint efforts. Whenever his parents-in-law came to try to help solve the problem, he would insult them and get his wife well beaten in front of her parents. 'You keep forgetting that I know who you are and where you come from,' he would say as he beat and insulted her, implying that he was more civilised."

"What a savage man," Lilly Loveless pronounced, much to Britney's pleasure.

"His wife went privately and looked for her own house, got it well equipped and finally decided to leave her husband. He told her she should make sure she takes along her children because he did not have any use for them. She was very happy to take away her daughter and son, for no one who knows the pain of child birth would talk so disparagingly of children, however handicapped, poor and helpless."

Britney pressed pause when they came to the halfway point of the journey, a little roadside junction village that had become a bustling commercial centre, thanks to the road. It was too early for a heavy meal, so Lilly Loveless and Britney settled for bread and coffee.

"Could we have two cups of coffee?" Britney asked the young woman whose eating place they chose amongst the competing lot.

The young woman replied, "With or without milk. We have only powder milk from Muzunguland. Our goats are much too conscious of their looks to be harnessed for milk, and we are not a cattle rearing community."

"We'll just have to make do with that, won't we?" said Britney, stealing a look at Lilly Loveless, as if to say, 'what would we do without Muzunguland?'

They finished their coffee and bread and returned to the bus well ahead of the other passengers, some of whom had settled for real meals with bush meat, roasted beef, fish and all the other renowned offerings that made this village so popular with travellers seeking food and drink.

Britney took advantage to continue with her story.

"The lady and her children out of the house," she began, pressing the button of the recorder. "Now, it was the turn of the university girl to come in. Things went well for the first six months. Instead of this man controlling this little girl, she was the patron of the house. This man would give all his salary to this girl but she was never satisfied and hardly satisfying."

"I like that turn of phrase," said Lilly Loveless.

Britney smiled her appreciation for the compliment and continued.

"And that's not all," said she, glancing to make sure the pen of Lilly Loveless was moving. "She still maintained her old boyfriends and even had new ones. Immediately her husband left home to work, she would also leave to see one of her boyfriends. And as if this was not enough, she would add salt to the wound by bringing these men into her husband's bedroom.

"One day, her husband surprised them making love on his bed. Instead of him reacting, this girl and her boyfriend got this man well beaten, rendered him helpless and took away some of his possessions."

"What! Was she crazy or what?" Lilly Loveless looked puzzled.

"The girl went for good," said Britney. "The man, her husband, screamed for help and neighbours rushed him to the hospital."

"I hope he recovered OK."

"Yes, and he has now vowed never to marry again. He has joined that group of men who believe that women are she-devils who tempt, entice and seduce men to involve them in evil deeds. He and others like him give the impression that men are well behaved, considerate and morally upright. But you and I know better, don't we?" Again Britney eyed Lilly Loveless, a sisterly smile on her face.

Lilly Loveless smiled back without giving her a clue as to which way she would vote, if she voted at all on the matter.

Britney continued: "As for the wife whom the husband chased out in favour of the university girl, I was able to hear things from her point of view when she was over visiting her mother. As she put it, 'The long and short is that our life in the house became rough. When men have affairs they start to look at their wives and children as a burden. So he literally acted like a teenager. It was impossible to reason with him. I moved out of our house with the children and left him. He did not see anything wrong with us moving out. He simply said that he liked the house and he was not prepared to move even if it was for the children. It is amazing because even now it is a challenge to get him to pay anything towards the needs of the children.'"

"I hate to see people maltreat children," said Lilly Loveless. "It's better not to have them at all than to treat them poorly."

"Apparently, he makes the children's lives miserable, especially Thelma's. He reminds them that he is paying maintenance, which they don't even understand, as they are still so small. It is painful to see. Every time the kids visit him they are reminded of the money that he is paying. Yet he does not even pay a third of what he is legally supposed to pay. I heard the wife say: 'I do not want to fight with him over the amount as I do not see it as important. What matters to me is the wellbeing of the children. He does not seem to enjoy the time with his own children. They are like a burden to him. They are such wonderful children, not very demanding at all, yet he doesn't enjoy them. This breaks my heart, but that is his choice. Even though I can fight with him, I choose not to. My concern is with Thelma and Elias. We are managing. It was so good that I got a job even before I relocated to Nyamandem, so I do not have to rely on him for anything. I never have anyway. Life goes on and I am having a good time with the children despite all these challenges.'"

"Good that she took it positively," commented Lilly Loveless. "These things can be deadly stressful. I know from my parents' own divorce and what some friends I know have gone through."

"His first wife has actually become a research director somewhere in Nyamandem while he has become very miserable. He lost his job subsequently."

Britney pressed stop just as she concluded the second story of the day and asked, "Would you like to take a break?"

"Oh, no," said Lilly Loveless, "we're on a roll. Let's keep going if you don't mind."

With that, Britney pressed record and carried on.

* * *

"I know of this married man who lives with his wife not far from my place. His girlfriend lives about 100 metres away from them. Whenever his wife has gone to the market or a social group meeting he will invite his girlfriend to his house. Whenever his wife met this girl, the girl was always very bold and ready to fight the wife. When his wife got pregnant, he decided that she should go and have the baby at her home village with her parents. When she left, her husband's girlfriend became madam and packed into the house."

Lilly Loveless took out a pack of chewing gum from her bag and offered some to Britney, who declined, saying it would interfere with her story.

So she went on: "Some neighbours met the girl's parents and complained to them. All that her mother could say was that 'my daughter is a beautiful girl and she is not the first to go after a married man, so you people should mind your business.' For this reason many people decided not to talk about it again.

"The man's wife surprisingly came back without notifying her husband. She met his girlfriend well-installed in the house. She shouted and neighbours crowded around. She said openly that if this girl does not leave her husband, she will kill her. People persuaded the girl and she packed her things. Even so, the girl was very arrogant. Whenever and wherever she met her boyfriend's wife, she would insult her and this lady always complained to her husband who on his part also gave a deaf ear. Unfortunately for this girl, she fell seriously sick and later died in the hospital. Rumour went all over Puttkamerstown that it was her boyfriend's wife who killed her. But who knows? We are told that AIDS manifests itself in mysterious ways, although deaths continue to be blamed on witchcraft, poison, common colds and what have you."

"Hmmm...," intoned Lilly Loveless, chewing her gum. "Have you another story for today?"

"One more," said Britney, "then I'll let you take a nap until we arrive in the midst of the banana plantations that have made our Mimboland a proud, world-renowned banana republic. You'll want to see the rich rolling hills."

Lilly Loveless nodded excitedly.

"A famous director was once my neighbour," began Britney, "very ugly and very rich."

"You have a lot of neighbours," commented Lilly Loveless.

"Well, by the time I knew this one, he had divorced four wives. Though ugly, he still had the best girls as his girlfriends since he settled them

well. He was a man of age, but his target was girls below 18 years. His fifth wife was the same age as his fourth daughter."

"Really?" interjected Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, and this girl was a piece of beauty. People thought that with such a beautiful girl, he would be content."

"What made them think that," asked Lilly Loveless, "knowing his patterns?"

Britney was glad Lilly Loveless seemed to be getting back to being like Lilly Loveless. She continued, ignoring the question.

"He provided everything at home like food and healthcare and catered for the three children he had with this fifth wife. Despite all this, he never gave his wife a stipend or pocket allowance. He was never at home so he seldom talked with his wife. They were friends only when her husband wanted a new baby."

"What a marriage!" Lilly Loveless came in again.

"The fifth wife was faced with hardship because her father had died when she was still young and being the first born, she had to meet many challenges. Her father had been a cook to a Muzungu man in Sawang. Before he died, he had not built a house, so when her mother was giving her into marriage at the age of 13, she knew the director would not only take care of her daughter but also the entire family."

"So there are mothers who even encourage their daughters to enter into these relationships with much older men?" interrupted Lilly Loveless.

"Of course," responded Britney, "but this mother miscalculated."

"In what way?"

"The girl herself did not know she was married, not until the man started making love – climbing on top of her with his lumpy, selfish, inconsiderate and insensitive bulk, aggressively seeking satisfaction. She was disinterested in his urges, tastes and desires, and it didn't help when he did little to disguise his love for other women. With this background as she told me, she embarked on prostitution. She was a small clerk in one of the offices around town. Whenever her husband dropped her at her job site she obtained permission to leave from her boss, saying that her child was sick or giving any other reason. Since she had access to a cell phone, men could easily call her and from there, she would take off.

"Since she knew the time her husband returned home, she made sure she arrived home a few minutes before him. She once told me as a friend: 'I will show Pa that I can make love to his betters since he uses small girls to ridicule me.' In pidgin she added: 'Ma Papa hi house nobi de smell me before I go maret.'"

"Which means?"

"It wasn't the stench in my father's house that I couldn't stand that drove me into the hands of marriage."

"How profound," commented Lilly Loveless, "especially from a woman forced into marriage at such an early age."

"One day, she was just coming out of Par-Amour Hotel with a man when her husband was also driving in with a very young girl."

"Uh-oh."

"She asked her boyfriend to drop her at Lulu Coiffure where I was doing my hair. She came fuming with anger. She told me and others present

what she had seen and wanted to go into the hotel to disgrace her husband. We cautioned her that she was merely going to make a fool of herself. She forgot one thing: that disgracing her husband could mean an end to their marriage."

"Lucky for her to run into some advisors," volunteered Lilly Loveless.

"What she did was, she packed her things and went to her mother, taking along her children, thinking that her husband would come searching for her. To her greatest dismay, he never went there nor begged her in anyway. As she told me, 'My friend, hungry want kill me and my pikin them for Sawang, so I been see say: better I come back, after all, me too I de try my own line dem. Papa dem de talk for village say better man wear old cap dan for waka with empty head. Man pikin dey like cock. When yi talk two time: I de cam you no de see-am, I de cam you no de see-am, I give you one yard wrapper? Any woman wey ye deny na ye know.'

"Even when she came back, her husband did not offer a word. When he looked at her, you could see his eyes asking: 'whatever became of the slim beautiful girl I married?' He was full of disgust for her, as if she had become too fat for his liking, and had developed such bad habits like picking her nose absentmindedly, clearing her throat and spitting carelessly, and generally not attending to her dressing and appearance the way she was expected to keep him attracted. So she told me that this incident made her vow never again to run away from her home where she was sure of shelter, food, medication and her children's education was guaranteed.

"Her husband's presence, according to her, did not disturb her from prostituting. She exaggerated her clandestine outings until one day she fell inside an uncompleted latrine when she was returning from one of her 'rendezvous.'"

"No way," insisted Lilly Loveless.

"For real, but fortunately, this hole was behind our house, so when I heard her voice, I rushed out, taking a torch with me. I found her inside a deep hole, and I managed to bring her out."

"You go to great depths in your friendships," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Wouldn't you do the same if I were in such a situation?" insisted Britney.

"Luckily you're not someone to get yourself into such a situation, are you?" asked Lilly Loveless, both assuredly and hopefully.

"At any rate, this friend, she did not sustain any major injury. Despite this whole incident, she was still returning home late at night. At first, she passed by my house many times to take a 'Kaba Ngondo' when she realised that her husband arrived before her and forced me to escort her to her house. I did not know that she was telling her husband that she was with me or that we were returning from a quarter meeting. When I realised this, I ceased to receive her in my house.

"Now, these days, her husband has become weak and is doing everything to please her. He has bought an affordable second-hand Mercedes for her. Instead of this keeping her calm, she has become worse, and has even been nick-named 'Mammy Gentile.'"

"So," suggested Lilly Loveless, "as the old man retired and his heart

awoke, the young girl was off in the woods."

"I guess you could put it that way. Anyway, she was that way from the beginning, ever since her mother handed her over. And, if you don't mind my saying, I think you could use a nap."

"Nap?" exclaimed Lilly Loveless, "With those hills you spoke about coming into view? And the sweet, succulent tropical fruit paradise you promised? How could I?"

She anticipated each new turn, to refill her eyes and spirit. Even without drumbeats, banana leaves were dancing with pawpaw fruits and pineapples in carnival. Everything was so rich and green and lavish, so virtuous. It was as if God, on his way through these parts, had stumbled over a root or something and spilled her basket of abundance there. Little wonder that many tourists were in the habit of referring to these parts of Mimboland as Africa in miniature, the dream of a lifetime and a lifetime of dream. God was certainly at her creative best when she dwelled on these parts.

Britney smiled and looked out of the window, determined to make this the best touristic experience for Lilly Loveless for a long, long time to come.

Britney also composed in her head, an email which she wanted to send to Providence as soon as they arrived in Zintgraffstown. In addition to telling him 'mission accomplished – your mom's phone is safely with her and you can now reach her whenever you want with instructions on where and when to go for her remittances,' she planned to write: "Providence, sweetheart, I have, I believe, recovered from the typhoid. My mother prepared some herbs and sent down for me to drink. I have been drinking them all this while. She sends her greetings. By the way, she was very sick, problems with her throat and chest. She went to the hospital in Zintgraffstown. I seized the opportunity of bringing the parcel to your mom to see her, and she has improved remarkably. Your daughter is a bit fat but very happy and her eyes as beautiful as always. She misses her Dad, and so does her mum, so much you cannot imagine... I must tell you, I am so lonely and I feel like I have lost somebody who was and is still my inspiration. Some days missing you is particularly acute. In the mornings and sometimes in the afternoon on such days, I feel you would come calling at any moment. When the day passes and you don't come, it breaks my heart and I feel something great is missing. I feel empty. I wait for your charming smile all day long. I can never tell you enough what a charming smile you've got. It is hard, darling, very hard. I pray that I will be fine. Best of luck dear, my love flies to you with all the success it can bring."

Britney manoeuvred from stall to stall at the bustling Puttkamerstown food market. She was doing her weekly shopping and collecting what she needed to prepare a sumptuous Saturday lunch at her place for Lilly Loveless. Market women kept asking her how much she paid the whiteman-woman – who followed not far behind – to carry her basket around.

It was obvious that Britney was a regular, the way she was greeted by those from whom she bought condiments and vegetables and fruits and by those from whom she did not. She didn't buy her tomatoes just anywhere. She passed many up before arriving in front of a plump woman seated behind her wooden table and nursing her baby at the edge of the market. The woman automatically selected for Britney the firmest tomatoes from the different piles of five each before her. "Man yi customer na man yi customer," she said, and Britney thanked her for the friendship and understanding.

Britney had wanted to make Achu, but she wasn't happy with the quality of the cocoyam at the market that day. She therefore settled for Poulet DG after a brief consultation with Lilly Loveless who, having tasted Jollof Rice already, was eager for something new, and for her first Directeur General experience. There was not too much haggling over prices, until it came to discussing the price of the chicken. A runt of a man offered her a smallish chicken for what she wanted to pay, but she insisted she needed the biggest and fleshiest to prepare a proper first Poulet DG experience for her august visitor from Muzunguland. 'You no get respect for whiteman-woman?' asked Britney. She accused the poultry seller of wanting to block her from being a good hostess, until he backed down, insisting that she would have to acknowledge his sacrifice by committing herself to buying from him and only him in future. So finally they met halfway, and he gave the chicken to two young boys to behead and slice up as Britney had instructed, under her close supervision.

Britney took time for the plantains, selecting the plumpest she could find. On the way out of the market, she teased a young girl dousing water from a plastic bag on fish to keep it fresh that she better not spoil her new purple top with that fishy water or she'd mess with her.

Just as they emerged from the market with their purchases, a cyclist motioned with his left hand to pass in front of Britney– with at least a half dozen grey and white speckled guinea fowls attached to each side of his handlebars. Lilly Loveless dropped the bags she was carrying and reached for her camera bag, then thought better about causing an accident, and settled for a mental photo.

Greetings in pidgin from fellow students filled the walk to Britney's off-campus apartment. Lilly Loveless thought of the signs she had seen on campus before it closed, something about speaking pidgin making you write Muzungulandish badly. She wondered if there had actually been research done to confirm the bold affirmation. She heard Britney using pidgin fluently and, judging from their exchanges so far, thought Britney mastered Muzungulandish just as well. She made a mental note to copy all the signs on pidgin at the university before leaving Puttkamerstown, if she was lucky

enough for the strike to end before her journey back home. Lilly Loveless doubted if the administration were not themselves guilty of worse practices, as she had seen a sign about keeping the campus clean, which read: 'To gather dirtiness is good, not to make dirty is better.' Perhaps some rules are meant to be broken, and only by breaking rules of grammar and good speech could new speech patterns emerge. Not to speak a language well could be a people's way of saying: 'If we have been talking your language, maybe you should start talking ours.'

The two were breathing heavily by the time they climbed three flights of stairs with their purchases. Britney opened one, two, three locks to let them in. She started unpacking the basket Lilly Loveless set on the counter. Lilly Loveless let her eyes rove around the kitchen and the opening from there out on the sitting room. "Well equipped," she commented after noting the microwave, the blender, an exercise bike, the big screen TV and state of the art speakers. A real student with a difference, she thought; she must be bleeding to death the men in her life.

"That's thanks to my fiancé in Muzunguland," explained Britney offhandedly. "Go ahead and put some good music on and make yourself comfortable while I concentrate on things here."

"I'll be right there to help you slice up the plantains," volunteered Lilly Loveless.

"Not to," said Britney, declining the offer. "They have to be cut just so, to match the way the chicken has been sliced. But feel free to make yourself comfortable with music, a book, or whatever catches your fancy."

Lilly Loveless settled down to sampling the music but before too long the aromas from the kitchen drew her there.

"So, why do we call this dish, Poulet DG?" she asked as she leaned against the doorframe of the kitchen.

"I knew you'd ask," said Britney, who now wore an apron over her purple top and Levis. "It's because if you try to buy this chicken dish at any restaurant, it'll cost you at least Mim\$8000, something only a Director General could afford in those days when people came about the name. Today it remains a prized dish, and a great honour to serve and be served it. So, Lilly Loveless, I'm making you a very elite dish."

"Mere students, relishing Poulet DG," mused Lilly Loveless. "This is an occasion."

"One you'll remember when you're back in Muzunguland, I hope," said Britney. "With me, friendship means everything, much more than money. Someone can have money yet die of loneliness."

"That's true," agreed Lilly Loveless. "I come from a society where it is very common to be rich and lonely."

"I've heard a lot about that disease. Providence, my fiancé, the rhythm of my heart, keeps telling me tales of what a strange lot you are in this regard."

"You've never mentioned your fiancé to me," remarked Lilly Loveless, "at least not directly."

"That's because I'm employed by you to do a particular assignment, not to talk about myself," Britney countered.

"So you promise to tell me your own story when this assignment is over?"

"I promise to think about it."

"That would be great. There are many things I'd like to learn about you and from you. For one thing, I'd like you to teach me how to make Poulet DG, so I may create it back home in Muzunguland," said Lilly Loveless.

"Only if you can sneak the right spices across borders," corrected Britney. "You don't think I'm using just stock cubes do you?!"

"Of course not, master chef, let me get the table set."

"What table? We'll just serve ourselves in the kitchen and sit in front of the TV to eat," explained Britney.

After a while, Britney and Lilly Loveless did just that. Britney was obviously content with how things had turned out and with the compliments and lip-licking of Lilly Loveless.

As they ate, Britney took the opportunity to crosscheck on several things about Muzunguland, most of which she had picked up second-hand, and the rest from Providence and her other friends out there. One of the first emails Providence sent back to her was a complaint on how he was forced to cook his own food, mostly rice and chicken, and how he had over salted the onion and tomato sauce. To which Britney replied: 'You can see how valuable women are.'

Britney told Lilly Loveless: "He simply does not know how to cook and eats poorly when I'm not there. Out there in Muzunguland, he is picking up and adding a lot of weight now. I love him better when he is fuller but not fat. Unfortunately, I seem to be putting on weight as well and Providence is complaining too, so I'm back to dieting and my regular exercises. I seem to add weight faster when I'm more relaxed, so thank you for giving me a job to keep me busy and not simply sitting at the reception of Mountain View."

"But you've got a nice cute figure. You are not fat at all," said Lilly Loveless, sizing her up. "A bit plump maybe but certainly not fat."

"That's what you see now," said Britney. "But you needed to see me a few months back. I was like my reflection in water."

"I don't believe you."

They both laughed.

Britney asked Lilly Loveless if it is true, what she's heard from Providence and her girlfriends, that life in Muzunguland is generally peaceful, in terms of housework, and that it's a lot easier than back here in Mimboland. Everything is provided to make cleaning and washing faster and more enjoyable. "Providence has promised to provide me with some of the gadgets he has now in Muzunguland when he gets back home so that I don't need to hire a house help. He is completely pissed off with the problems of house help and the bad influence on kids. I'm very grateful about that, of course."

Lilly Loveless agreed that things are relatively more expensive in Muzunguland, but insisted that people are coping because of a lot more opportunity to work and for better pay.

"Providence says the people are cold at first, but when you get to know them, they can be nice. They are also very hardworking and humble. There, work is their religion and they are well-paid."

Lilly Loveless agreed.

"A girlfriend of mine, who works like mad to send money back home to her family to educate the daughter she left behind, says that

Muzungulander women are nice too, but that most don't work. They are made to stay at home and take care of the kids. They don't actually understand the fact that she is still in school doing a PhD, because life is much easier for them and what their social security system dishes out is better than what a PhD earns here. However, most are very unhappy and want to work and be relevant. Is that true?"

"Yes, and no," said Lilly Loveless.

"Why yes and no?"

"Those who want to work can. But if they choose to work full time, they can't at the same time choose to be full time mothers. We have to be responsible in the choices we make, and bear the consequences."

"But children must be parented. Someone has to do it."

"But no one is forced to do it."

"In a way, people are forced, since society must continue to reproduce itself, and that entails bearing and bringing up children."

"Yes, but nobody holds a gun to your head to bear children and to mother them full time."

"It's an abnegation of social responsibility to think in those terms. Or is it because cheap and affordable labour is available from other parts of the world? I read the other day that low birth rates and a growing elderly population, are pushing your authorities in Muzunguland to entice the parents of each newborn or adopted child with huge monetary incentives."

Lilly Loveless didn't like the direction the discussion was taking, so she said: "I've made my choice, at least for the foreseeable future. No children, full stop. The idea of getting married and having children just scares me to death. And I am not alone. Fewer and fewer women are choosing to marry, and delayed or aborted motherhood is certainly the way of the future, judging by current trends in Muzunguland. Already, fertility clinics are offering women the opportunity to freeze some of their eggs for later should they change their mind about not having children. And the fact that more and more women are freezing their eggs in this way means that motherhood as you know and celebrate it in Mimboland is in danger of disappearing in the not so distant future." Back in Muzunguland, she belonged to circles where the belief is strong that there's nothing more certain to ruin a good relationship than marriage and children.

"How interesting," said Britney, shaking her head in vigorous denial, "A childless society? That's where we differ. I have one, and Providence and I plan to have a lot more when we settle down. Having children to us is like paying our debts to our parents and to past generations, and a contribution to ensuring the future."

"I agree and respect that," said Lilly Loveless, in a conciliatory tone. "But somehow, in our Muzunguland experience, people have always chosen whether or not to marry or have children, whether or not to be full time mothers, and society has never ground to a halt because of the choices. Somehow it has always worked, and perhaps for that reason, we don't stop to answer metaphysical questions. We remain grounded in everyday sociology."

"Wow," said Britney. "Na big big book tok dat," she added. She found Lilly Loveless' position a bit too strident for a social scientist. What use was everyday sociology if it could not stop to ask itself what would happen to everyday reality if every woman made the same choice not to marry and not

to have children?

"Too much pressure and emphasis on marriage and children by parents, culture or society only lead to hypocrisy and diminished happiness in relationships," added Lilly Loveless.

"How?"

"When you deny, as I'm sure they do here in Mimboland, sex before marriage for girls, and marriage is not as easy to come by for the girls of today as it was for their parents in yesteryear, what do you think is the consequence?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"You tell me."

"It is what you see in the interviews and stories you share with me. Girls go out with Mbomas, flying-shirts and whomever, but they do everything to hide it from their parents. Nobody is open and honest, because there is little room for honesty and openness in the society, culture and expectations. Because girls don't want to disappoint their parents, they subscribe to the ideals of marriage and children in principle and in public, but privately they are having sex with all manner of men and in all manner of ways, and if an unwanted pregnancy results, they abort, or if this fails, the child is literally abandoned to, or appropriated by, the girl's parents as the girl must not appear to compromise her chances of marriage. In cases where virginity is overly prioritised, girls submit to anal sex rather than do without. For others, if and when they eventually marry, they either fake virginity or resign themselves to an attitude of 'what is there that haven't I seen?' And indeed, because there is little they haven't seen and given the continued pressure for propriety, the contradictions do not stop with marriage. Infidelity gets epidemic, but few ever own up to doing it, trapped as they are in the realm of keeping up appearances in the name of marriage and decent family life. Believe it or not, where I come from, women are increasingly impatient with marriage and the conventional idea of a family. I am one of those, and have no apologies to offer. No marriage, no children. And I'm sure society will not die just because I and a growing number of others are unhappy with the values in place, unhappy with being told that our happiness must necessarily depend on marriage and children..." Lilly Loveless went on and on, speaking as if she were rehearsing an idea more for herself and her thesis than for Britney.

"Interesting dessert," said Britney. "But I'm too full right now to do it justice," she added, standing up. She took the dishes to the kitchen, but came back when she remembered something. "There's a joke my girlfriend in Muzunguland told me recently. I wrote it down." She looked for the notebook on her shelf and opened the page with the joke, saying "I would like to know what you think of this."

"A man prayed to God: 'Dear Lord: I go to work every day and put in 8 hours while the mother of my children merely stays at home. I want her to know what I go through, so please allow us to switch bodies for a day. Amen.'" Britney could see that Lilly Loveless was listening.

"So God, in his infinite wisdom, granted the man's wish. The next morning, sure enough, the man awoke in the image of his wife. He arose, cooked breakfast for the mother of his children, awakened the children, set out their school uniforms, bathed and dressed them, fed them breakfast, packed their lunches, accompanied them to take the bus to school, came back

home and did the family laundry, stopped at the bank to see if there was anything left from his salary for last month, went to the food market and the shops for groceries, then took a bus back home to put away the groceries, paid the bills and balanced the chequebook. He cleaned the cat's litter box, bathed the dog, and disposed of their shit. Then it was already 1pm and he hurried to make the beds, vacuum cleaned, dusted, and mopped the kitchen floor, sitting room and bedrooms. Ran to the bus stop to pick up the children and got into an argument with them on the way home. Set out lunch and got the children organized to do their homework, then set up the ironing board and watched TV while he did the ironing. At 4:30pm, he began peeling potatoes and washing vegetables for salad, breaded the pork chops and snapped fresh beans for supper. After supper, he cleaned the kitchen and the dishes, folded laundry, bathed the children, and put them to bed, where he read them stories until they fell asleep. At 9pm, he was exhausted and, though his daily chores weren't finished, he went to bed where he was expected to make love, which he managed to get through without complaint..." Britney looked at Lilly Loveless, who was still listening, keenly.

"The next morning, he awoke and immediately knelt by the bed and said: 'Lord, I don't know what I was thinking. I was so wrong to envy my wife's being able to stay home all day. Please, oh please, let us trade back.'"

"And what did the Lord say?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"The Lord, in his infinite wisdom, replied: 'My son, I feel you have learned your lesson and I will be happy to change things back to the way they were. You'll just have to wait nine months, though. You got pregnant last night.'" Britney exploded in a sardonic laugh.

"Excellent!" shouted Lilly Loveless, recalling reading something similar on the Internet. "It proves my point that women must not be made to feel guilty for not living up to dubious norms."

"Time to get to work", said Britney. She turned off the television, as Lilly Loveless dug for her recorder and notebook, and sat back down on the couch beside Lilly Loveless and began recounting the stories she had listed.

* * *

"I remember a notorious neighbour..."

"Not a neighbour again!" exclaimed Lilly Loveless, half serious, half joking. "If you were to present your research to my professors, they'd say interesting though your stories are, there's little evidence of representativeness. Too many of the stories are from people you know..."

"You know what I'd tell them?" replied Britney. "I'd tell them there's a lot more to life than statistics. Better a good story well told than many short stories without depth. Isn't it you who told me that when I presented my very first interviews?"

"It was just a comment, which doesn't mean I doubt your accounts, as I don't necessarily agree with my professors," Lilly Loveless explained.

"But you have to dance to their tune for the sake of your degree?"

"Don't we all?"

"If I may continue, at first, my neighbour was not a friend," said Britney. "When she came into the neighbourhood where I lived with my parents, she was very beautiful and always well dressed but so rude, so unfriendly, and proud to a fault. She was very intelligent at university but

since she had frequent telephone calls and spent most of her time in expensive snacks, she had less time to concentrate – so she dropped out.”

“What a shame.”

“Her notorious boyfriend was an African of Muzunguland origin and when he was going back home, he gave all his belongings to this girl. Every four months, she visited him in Muzunguland. The love was so deep that this man created problems with his wife until he threatened to divorce her.

“This girl forgot that a woman is like a flower that withers. Instead of putting the money she earned from prostitution into business, she thought life would continue to be smooth.

“Most housewives hated her because she never greeted them but made sure to be friendly to almost every married man who was well-to-do. The worst part of it was that whenever she was drunk, she could make love even on the street, regardless of whether the sex was safe or not.”

“To which male moron?” Lilly Loveless nearly asked.

“One night after reading for a long time, I decided to go out for some fresh air. I heard her voice inside a parked car. I did not want her to see me, so I was rushing back inside, when I heard her call me by the nickname we used to call each other: ‘Dynamic, please don’t come and disturb me. Get back inside. I am having my fun,’ she told me. With a heavy head, I dashed into the house.”

“Why a heavy head?”

“You don’t want to be told to do what you should have done on your own accord, that’s why,” replied Britney.

“You’ve got a good heart,” reassured Lilly Loveless.

“It did not end there. In the morning, she came and visited me and said ‘Dynamic, na wettin be your problem wey you come see as I de enjoy me. If you see that motor again, no comot for house.’ I had to apologise, telling her I did not even know she was there in a parked car outside and advised her that she should avoid doing funny things in the open.

“She then confessed to me that there was someone else waiting for her inside, so she had to enjoy with the other person in the car first.”

Lilly Loveless interjected, “Timing her two-timing?”

“For a while. Now her beauty has faded. She has embarked on contracts but she hasn’t got the capital. All her clients have run away and life is so threatening to her.

“Worst of all, her African Muzungulander has ceased contact, and as if this were not enough, she is whispered to be suffering from AIDS,” Britney concluded the story about her notorious neighbour.

* * *

“Let me tell you now about Titus,” said Britney, consulting her list. “He is a final year student here at UM. He has been a final year student for two additional years because he cannot organise his time to suit his activities. When there’s a free beer, he spends most of his time drinking in snack bars with bushfallers with whom he is always sniffing for encounters. He attends classes only when there are no serious outdoor activities, and his parents think he is graduating when he, in reality, has hardly started.

“Titus’ father is not only popular for political reasons but, in the context of Mimboland, is also a well-to-do man. Titus has been going out

steadily with a certain Blenda who's a spendthrift and a very intelligent girl. She does computer skills training course somewhere in town. Her family background is not too poor but she is certainly selling high.

"Blenda had earlier been going out with a lecturer at the university, a hot-tempered middle-aged man who is popular for telling girls: 'Don't underestimate my ability to stay young.' He lost his patience with Blenda when he discovered she was keeping a flying-shirt. She did not really miss him as he was immediately replaced with another Mboma from Sakersbeach."

"Replaced just like that?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"It's not the first time you've heard such a thing," said Britney and continued. "Titus did not know that Blenda had been going out with this Mboma until he lost his father last year. His financial stand was threatened and he started to think that he was going to lose Blenda to one of his friends who had told him openly that he was going to challenge him by taking over his girlfriend.

"Therefore when he discovered that Blenda was going out with a Mboma, he arranged with her to have his own share of the money given to her by the Mboma. Blenda had no choice but to accept because Titus threatened to destroy the relationship. And so it was arranged that Titus should not come to sleep during the weekends at Blenda's place because she would be expecting her Mboma from Sakersbeach then."

"See what I mean about timing?" said Lilly Loveless as she took down her notes.

"One Saturday evening," continued Britney, "Blenda went to visit her Mboma in Sakersbeach to inform him that she wouldn't be at home all night because her home village cultural association was organising a gala night in Puttkamerstown. The Mboma accepted and promised to come on Sunday evening instead. Little did she know that the Mboma was very suspicious, as most tend to be, perhaps because they know their rivals are much younger university students who spend the most time with the girls."

"I like your insight and would encourage you to do more of that," said Lilly Loveless.

"Thanks. Actually, she had a cultural association gala to attend with Titus who expected her to come with enough money from Sakersbeach. They had a nice time at the party and finally decided to spend the rest of the night at Blenda's place. Blenda accepted because she did not expect her Mboma to come, having agreed with him earlier to come on Sunday."

"But he came," suggested Lilly Loveless.

"The Mboma left his family at Sakersbeach and was at Puttkamerstown at 5am Sunday morning, just to see whether his lady was a cheat. When Blenda heard the sound of his vehicle she couldn't believe it, but she took certain measures. She hid Titus in the bathroom and gave him her kaba to put on, so he could pretend to be a girl if discovered. Then she lay on the bed struggling to feel at ease and at the same time pretending to be sound asleep when her door opened. The Mboma had the spare key to her place. He woke her up and she pretended to be confused and to struggle with sleep."

"I can feel the tension mounting," said Lilly Loveless.

"She discussed with the Mboma who claimed to have stayed the whole night at Mount Rebecca Hospital with a relative who was seriously ill.

When he was about to go, he decided to ease himself but Blenda would not allow him. He used force to open the bathroom door and discovered the trick. Titus was there all dressed up in Blenda's kaba and ready for a fight, but the Mboma closed the bathroom door and walked out of Blenda's room saying he was never to be back again."

"Really? No palaver?" To Lilly Loveless, it sounded too good to be true. "No beating? No Violence? Unheard of," she swore.

"But he was back in a week's time."

"Just couldn't resist her?"

"Well," explained Britney, "Titus and Blenda weren't ready to give him up. The next day they went to Sakersbeach to explain the situation to the Mboma. A neighbour even accompanied them. Titus explained that he was a distant relative staying at Sawang who had come to attend the party. He showed his national identity card that revealed he was a student in Sawang. He also said he was putting on Blenda's kaba because he was forced to dry his clothes after it had rained on him. The Mboma was all the more convinced because Titus had the same surname as Blenda."

"What a coincidence," noted Lilly Loveless.

"Yes," agreed Britney, "that they used to their advantage. Notwithstanding, the fact that Titus had hidden in the bathroom left the Mboma still sceptical. But Blenda insisted that it was merely to avoid problems.

"Today, Titus is still going out with Blenda, but he avoids her room, especially at night and especially weekend nights."

"Because," Lilly Loveless asked, "Blenda still keeps her Mboma?"

"That's right," confirmed Britney. "And they both depend on his money for subsistence. When his friends mock him for being too soft, he says one must be realistic during these hard times, for no one can live on love alone."

"How common do you think is this attitude of Titus?"

"I can't say for sure, but quite a few flying-shirts are realistic about these things. What is important, I believe, is how well they play safe in terms of the relationship and especially, of safe sex," replied Britney.

"Exactly," Lilly Loveless agreed. "It's a delicate balancing act."

"I've a few more stories for today. I'll be right back," said Britney, as she dashed to the kitchen.

Britney returned from the kitchen with a platter of round pineapple slices and asked Lilly Loveless if she wanted tea.

"You've been in the kitchen enough today, no? How about if we get on with our work?"

"You sound like you're racing to get home to get ready for a big date tonight," said Britney.

"My biggest date today," said Lilly Loveless, "has been with you and the market women." They both laughed.

"How about Bobinga Iroko?" Britney eyed her curiously. "He is so fond of you."

"I know, and I'm very fond of him as well," said Lilly Loveless, intrigued by Britney's question. "Since when have you associated Bobinga Iroko and me?"

"For quite some time now," replied Britney. "Since the time some

girlfriends of mine saw the two of you dancing and kissing at a nightclub in Sakersbeach. They said you looked very much in love because your eyelashes kept going up and down and little stars came out of you, whenever Bobinga Iroko held your bottom tight to the tune of Zouk music."

"It's amazing what people know about you that you think nobody knows, since there is nothing for anyone to know."

"What?"

"Believe it or not, we are just friends, good friends."

"They said the two of you would suit each other very well as husband and wife," Britney made as if she didn't hear her. "They said you'd make beautiful zebra babies. We love zebras. They're a lovely colour..."

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Lilly Loveless asked impatiently. "We are just good friends, Bobinga Iroko and I, just good friends," she spelt out. "I enjoy talking with him. It makes me feel silly and alive. But over and above that, nothing."

"Who am I to doubt your story?" Britney laughed uncomfortably. "How interesting, everyone knows that you and Bobinga Iroko are going out together, only you and Bobinga Iroko don't know you are going out together, although you go out together."

It was Lilly Loveless' turn to say "What?"

"People should mind their own business, that's what it boils down to, doesn't it?"

"Exactly," said Lilly Loveless, curtly.

Britney got the message and returned to her story.

* * *

"This next story," she began, "is about Mr. Wilfred, who used to stay at Lower Eden here in Puttkamerstown. He was married and a father of four. He was a lecturer with one of the high schools in town, and his wife an employee of the Postal Service. Then he caught the Mboma disease, all of a sudden, at least, so his wife thought."

"What is the Mboma disease?"

"I mean the urge to cheat on your wife by going out with younger unmarried women."

"I see, the same old affliction."

"He became so funny at one point that he deliberately refused to give food money. He was sleeping out but his wife did not know where. This was when she was pregnant with their fourth child. Whenever she met her husband at home, which was rare, she would have him well beaten."

"Beating her man? That's what I call turning the tables on the men," remarked Lilly Loveless. "So far the violence in your stories has been overwhelmingly against women."

"You mustn't see violence only at the physical level or in terms of beatings," replied Britney. "There is such a thing as psychological violence, and women are exceptionally good at giving men their fair share of this. It doesn't have to be screaming or blood-dripping to be violence."

"Good point," admitted Lilly Loveless, scribbling in her notebook.

"Finally, she discovered where her husband spent most of his time. His concubine was working with the Public Treasury. Since they are noted for charging a '3 per cent rate' as bribe before rendering service, this concubine

could claim to be as rich as a category 4 civil servant when it otherwise would not be possible. She was so proud that she looked low on Mrs Wilfred.

"People advised Mrs Wilfred not to go to the concubine's residence, so all she could do was insult the concubine whenever they met in a public place.

"Mr Wilfred was eventually transferred out of Puttkamerstown, but he could not cope without his concubine. He struggled and bribed until he was transferred back to Puttkamerstown.

"Meanwhile, his wife passed the exam into the higher Postal Services School in Nyamandem. As she left for school, Mr Wilfred went home to his village and brought back a little girl to cater for his children at home. He packed his own belongings and went to meet his concubine, from whose place he paid his children regular visits like a part-time father. Mrs Wilfred returned from school to discover that her husband was living with his concubine. She is now taking care of her four kids while her husband is happily living with his concubine, with whom he now has three children."

"Do you think he'll stop there?" asked Lilly Loveless. "Or would he have a couple more somewhere else?"

"Let's not speculate about those things," said Britney, "let's just collect the data for now, isn't that what you've said before?"

Lilly Loveless felt like a dog with its tail between its legs. She couldn't bring herself to tell Britney that speculation during the research process was quite in order, having told her at the beginning how absolutely important it was for the researcher to keep her opinions in check.

* * *

"I didn't tell you yet about Mr Sims," Britney continued, rolling the paper in her hands and unrolling it. "A maid was working for him, because his wife was studying in Muzunguland. That Muzunguland of yours," Britney turned to Lilly Loveless who looked up, "if only you know how much havoc it has caused relationships here in Mimboland..."

"Now don't you start," Lilly Loveless warned. "We shan't go down that road of blaming on Muzunguland all the headaches of Mimboland, shall we?" She laughed to cushion the fact that she was serious, but Britney got the point.

"Each Friday," Britney continued, "this woman working to clean his house and prepare his food would, on her way out, turn to him and say, 'Is there anything else, sir?' And he would say, 'No, get home well.' He noticed that she always wore a V-neck shirt on Friday and that on each subsequent Friday it was as if she chose one lower cut than that of the previous week. One Friday when she asked if there was anything else, he said, 'Yes, turn around please.' She was already at the front door and she turned around. 'Bend over,' he said. She did. He lifted her dress, removed a condom from his pocket and donned it. When he finished he asked if that was 'anything else' she wanted and said she could go. He thought he had put an end to that behaviour of hers. But, no, the next Friday, before she left for home, she opened her blouse to nothing underneath and said, 'Is there anything else, sir?' He said, 'Yes, go into the bedroom please and take off all your clothes.' She did. And she was waiting for him anxiously. He entered the room with his digital camera. He snapped a few shots and said she could dress and go.

The next day, he sent the photos to his wife by email, explaining what had happened the previous evening and suggesting they get another maid."

Lilly Loveless shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"I only know this story," said Britney, "because a friend dated Mr Sims once for a couple of months a few years ago. Apparently the maid thought there was much to it. She would call and leave messages on his voice mail: 'What type of lover are you who doesn't call?' she would ask. 'I flash you and no response. And even when I buy airtime for my cell phone and call, you don't answer. Was it sour what you tasted?' Having got whatever it was he was looking for, Mr Sims had moved on, leaving the maid frozen on the spot like a digital camcorder on pause."

This story of the maid reminded Lilly Loveless of an Internet joke about a little boy who walks into his parent's bedroom to see his mom on top of his dad bouncing up and down. The parents stop and his mom quickly dismounts, pulling the covers around her. 'What were you and dad doing?' the boy asks his mom. 'Well, your dad has a big tummy and sometimes I have to get on top to help flatten his tummy,' she told her boy. 'You are wasting your time mom' says the boy. 'When you are not at home, the maid gets on her knees and blows it right back up.'

Not wanting to interrupt Britney, Lilly Loveless chose to save the idea of sharing the joke with her for later. It was striking to her how much of a necessary evil the maid is perceived to be the world over, as most women, regardless of status, beauty or intelligence, harbour anxiety about the effect of their maid on their husband. Her mind went back to Bobinga Iroko's story about the Reg, whose wife has a problem with him because of the child he had with their maid. How would he justify doing it? If what she had heard of him was anything to go by, she could imagine him saying: 'It appears to me that most women seem to really see their marriage certificate as a certificate of achievement, after which I have got him, he is mine no matter what I do, and his job is to take care of me and I owe him nothing in return, not even a good smile, and how was work today when he returns. Can't she stand by her man willy-nilly? Doesn't she know the adage: Behind every successful man is a woman on her knees?' The question of what maids have that madams don't, will continue to intrigue Lilly Loveless. Could it be that maids don't have what madams do: power? Could it be that maids offer calm in an ocean of turbulence called family life, and that this is what men find irresistible? Or is it the fact that maids do the cooking most of the times, and that food is a sure way to a man's heart? Structural!! Whatever the reasons, this was certainly a theme worth revisiting.

* * *

"There's a similar story," Britney continued, "about a renowned public figure in Nyamandem who loved his wife dearly. She, like Mr Sims' wife, was studying, yet again, in Muzunguland, and they spoke each day by Internet. He explained to his wife that he was incredibly horny, and she suggested he visit a prostitute discretely. So, he talked to his bodyguard to arrange this. A prostitute, any prostitute would do. All he wanted was to quench his fire. The prostitute knocked on his door in the early hours of dawn, just as had been agreed, to coincide with his early morning exercises. She was ushered into his study. He directed her to a long, low cushioned

footstool. He asked her to take off her trousers and get on the stool on all fours. Meanwhile he directed his Internet camera towards the stool. Then he called his wife on the Internet. They greeted each other. He said he wanted her. She asked him to take her. So he unzipped his trousers and visited the prostitute absent-mindedly. He kept gazing at the image of his wife and rubbing the bum of the prostitute. Afterwards he asked her to dress, paid her in front of his wife, and showed her to the door. 'Making love to you on camera is very erotic,' he told his wife. 'You know I'm visual, and like to look at who I'm making love to,' he added, a broad smile on his relaxed face. Then he fetched his Bible and started his morning prayers, for he was a God-fearing man."

Lilly Loveless looked at Britney with, for the first time, a speck of doubt. "Where'd you get that story?" she asked.

"From a friend who studies literature with me," said Britney, asking herself why Lilly Loveless should ask about this particular story. "She decided to work as a prostitute to make her way through school," she added, as Lilly Loveless was still eyeing her curiously.

"I see," said Lilly Loveless. She hoped Britney was not reading and adapting Muzungu books to Mimboland experiences in the interest of keeping her job as research assistant. She could swear she had read repeatedly of surveys to the effect that men base their decisions on whom to go out with mostly on physical attractiveness, and that they were in general much less choosy than women, who tended to be much choosier about partners than men were. But how could she confront Britney on this issue without compromising their rapport? In any case, she was going to pick and choose with care, accepting for inclusion in her write-up only what made sense to her as an objective researcher, Lilly Loveless resolved.

* * *

"I have another friend who has a friend with Internet connection at home, who was telling her about how she dances in front of the Internet camera with her clothes off for her boyfriend, a Muzungu man in Muzunguland, a man she is yet to meet physically, or rather, face to face. He would get turned on and virtually come. Only trouble is, she would do this early in the morning or late at night with her bedside light on. She didn't realize that her curtains were translucent, meaning her dancing shadow was perceived from the alley that ran by her bedroom window. So young boys were posted near her window at the expected times and instructed to call the older boys when things began. Her Internet show wasn't as private as she thought and this led her to a lot of hassles. Boys in the neighbourhood started to think she was really loose and wouldn't stop knocking on her door and stalking her. She finally had to move."

"And get opaque curtains?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"No, away from her moralising neighbourhood," said Britney. She thought for a while and added, "Do you know that if only one could make nonsense of morality one would make sense of a lot of nonsense?"

"You mean reality can be most imprisoning?"

"I mean moralising reality. This study of yours is teaching me that there are many things we fail to understand because we are too moralising in our approach to understanding them. Being too normative could stand in the

way of discernment."

Lilly Loveless didn't comment, but she knew Britney had a point.

* * *

"There are other friends," Britney went on, "who surf the net day and night, posting nude photos of themselves, sending emails left and right, mostly to Muzunguland, looking for boyfriends and husbands."

"Really? When the Internet here is so slow?"

"They are patient. Women who look for a husband know that the first lesson in these things is patience," Britney replied.

"I see," said Lilly Loveless. "Tell me more."

"There is one particular friend. She has given up on her studies at the university. She targets lonely hearts with love and comfort on the Internet. She can spend hours every day surfing for electronic footprints of her virtual game and virtually chatting, flirting, meeting and fornicating with perfect strangers, who have little time to waste trying to charm girls in real life. Her one and only obsession is finding a Muzungu husband rich enough to take her over to Muzunguland and marry her. So she spends the whole time creating different email accounts under different fake names, writing to various men around Muzunguland with offers of instant love. First she digs up your details by Google, which she studies meticulously. When satisfied, she sends you a test email, a sort of teaser. If you fall for it, then she passes to the next stage, which involves using all her attributes to lure you into marriage, or at least, into coming to visit or sending her a ticket to visit you."

"How ingenious," remarked Lilly Loveless. "How often does she succeed?"

"She hasn't quite found a husband yet, else she wouldn't still be here," replied Britney. "But she has succeeded in bringing one Muzungu man here to visit and also in defrauding many of them of big cash. Some others, mostly the married ones, have taken cover behind the Internet to beat her at her own game. But even these ones have had their fingers burnt once in a while. You just can't have your cake and eat it always."

"Really? Could I see her?"

"That would be unethical, wouldn't it? I'd not only be sharing with you, a total stranger, the life experiences of my friends and acquaintances, I would be exposing them to danger," Britney moralised. "Do you think that the names I give you in the stories I tell you are real? I'd be the world's greatest fool to do a thing like that."

Lilly Loveless felt it, acutely, and apologised profusely. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, just joking. You are perfectly right. No researcher should seek to violate the privacy of those she studies in this manner."

Britney was pleased to have Lilly Loveless on the defensive. It thrilled her, but she opted to reassure her employer. "Not to worry, Lilly. I know you didn't mean it. But I copied down samples of the letters this girl who insists she is putting her natural resources to good use, writes and sends to multiple recipients around the net like baits."

"That's an interesting analogy, using letters like baits to fish for lovers on the net. A real fisher of men, she is," said Lilly Loveless, more to inspire herself in terms of analysis than for Britney.

"One sample goes thus: Aloha, my dear friend. We don't know each

other yet, but I would greatly like to learn you better. I am a lady of passion and fire, the lonely heart that is looking for the second one to connect and give birth to a fire of love! I want to tell you about myself: I am a gatherer of good qualities – kind, romantic, passionate, tender, attentive, smart, attractive... and all this was not valued by men in my country, so I decided to find a husband abroad... My fire is burning, I am waiting for you to come and warm yourself near me... learn me better and write me a letter, I will be waiting to warm the winter of your heart! Have a nice day.”

Lilly Loveless shifted in her seat, her notebook and pen active.

“In a second sample, she writes: ‘Hi, it is my great pleasure to meet you. How is life with you over there? Do not be surprised on how I managed to lay hands on your email address. It was through searching and I saw your profile and I fell for it, for first friendship cannot be seen or even be touched, it must be felt within the heart. Hoping you feel just the way I do. Wow, friends are like clothes, without them you feel naked! I guess am right. I am a Mimboland citizen, Lizette Banane by name, am 25 years old this coming December 25th, a single Christian lady. In case you have interest in my short introduction, please get back to me with the same email address. Then I can forward you my full background on all you need to know about me and my parents along with my picture. Till I read from you.”

“A real fisher of men, she is,” remarked Lilly Loveless.

“With others, her bait is: ‘Hello Friend, how are you doing today? Well I’m Ebonia Honey. I’m 24 years of age and looking for the love of my life and a real man that will love me as much as I will love him in return. I’m single and if we get to know more of and love each other so much, we could walk up the altar some day as I would really love to settle down soon... I would be glad if I can find that one and only true love that I’ve been searching for all my life. I would want us to get to know each other by telling me more about yourself in your reply for us to know each other better. Get back to me as soon as you can and if you are interested. With Love, Ebonia Honey of Mimboland.”

Britney motioned to stop Lilly Loveless from making a remark, as she wanted to concentrate on the story. Lilly Loveless yielded and she continued.

“Sometimes she is long and detailed: ‘Hi, I have the feeling that this piece of mail will reach you in a perfect state of mind and in better health. While searching through the net, I came across your contact address and decided to contact you. I believe and also have the feeling that in today’s world, there is no reason why race, nationality or religion should stand in the way of a relationship between a man and a woman. Although, we do not know each other well, but I will really like to have you as a friend or pen pal if that is better for you. I am a single lady of 24 years of age, currently studying international relations at the University of Mimbo, a citizen of Mimboland, residing with my parents in Puttkamerstown. Presently, I am doing my final year in the university and so anxious to graduate into the free world. While I hope to hear from you soon, I also look forward to receiving some information concerning you, your family, city and even your personal life experiences. This will give us the opportunity of knowing each other better and be able to understand ourselves more. May God bless you as I wait to hear from you soon through this email address. Thanks. Yours Love, Arata Angèle.”

"Do the men write back often?" Lilly Loveless asked. "It is important for me to know," she added when Britney eyed her with muted impatience.

"When she is fortunate to attract a promising response, she passes to the next step: 'Hello, it is my pleasure to have seen your reply to my mail. I wish to say thanks very much for it and acceptance to my friendship because it is very hard to confide or reply a strange mail from someone through the Internet in this new generation. Really we do not know each other but I believe it is the wish of God to have come in contact with you after going through your profile and saw your latest album, titled 'On dit Quoi?', which interested me and I decided to write you. So how are things in general, my dear? Hope sound, perfectly cool with you and your family? Well we have to give thanks to the Almighty God for his love and kindness on us all.

'I am happy for the content of your sincere mail. Well, in respect of my profile, as I told you in my first mail that I am a 24-year-old student who is about to graduate soon with a degree in International Relations from the University of Mimbo, maybe going further to pursue my masters in future. I am a native of Mimboland from what is known locally as the 11th Region, and my full name is Anita Graffi.

'I work out my daily activities, love to read a variety of books, I think I am sensitive and kind to people, my mother says that I am good looking and take good care of my body and my looks. Also I think I have a good sense of humour, enjoy going to theatre, nightclubs, shopping and being a good Christian. And that teaches me to be open-minded, forgiving, loving. And of my hobbies, I like to laugh, I love to be spontaneous, and I am usually up to trying any good thing at least once. I love relaxing indoors after the day's activities, by watching movies and reading. I have peace in my heart that God will give me the sweetest person in the whole universe: mature, fun to be with, warm hearted, and would be able to cry on his shoulder and he will also cry on mine too. So I can say like Paul: though I am not what I ought to be nor what I wish to be, nor yet what I hope to be, I can truly say I am not what I once was, only can be told by people!!

'A Little about Me:

'My sign: I do not believe in signs and I am 1.62 metres tall. I weigh 52.20kgs, I'm a people's person if I may say - very warm, giving, committed to family, friendly, funny. I think I am Smart...ahhhh and hope to be full of charm... I do not smoke, but occasionally drink at my free time!!

'Favourite Things: My favourite things include my family and my education mostly. I have nine sisters, six brothers and three mothers, one biological, two step. My hobbies and interests: I like being at the library when the university is not on strike or hostel, reading, watching movies, cooking, gossiping and laughing with friends. My favourite quotes: 'Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own joy'; 'A successful marriage requires falling in love many times with the same person.' Please see a lovely picture of me at the Sakersbeach beach attached. The long hair is natural. Hope to hear from you in general and take care, and may God bless you. I am looking forward to seeing your picture sent to me on your reply.'"

"I sense the fish taking the bait," said Lilly Loveless, excited.

"If something serious develops, as has happened before, she goes to Sawang on special appointments with the man, where the cybercafés are

really well equipped with broadband connections, webcams and all. There, she books into a cubicle of her own, where she has all the privacy she needs. She is ready for her love play, once she dials up her guy on Skype, webcam and all. One thing leads to another. First, they talk sex, then they start touching themselves for each other, and then... deeper and deeper it gets until each has an orgasm, sometimes multiple. 'That was so sweet,' she would tell her man on the computer screen. 'Somehow, you know how to make me smile all over my being. When I listen to our love music, I quiver with pleasure like a reed in the middle of a river. You and you alone are the tonic of my life. You conquer stress and leave me smiling for the rest of the day and for days before we meet again. You are simply the best.' Depending on what the guy in the computer is looking for, she's either in business or not, but that's what you get with fishing. Not every fish that nibbles at your bait swallows it."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Lilly Loveless, lost for words. "And all of this is happening here in Mimboland?"

"Right here in Puttkamerstown. We are a small little town, but as we say in Mimboland, 'small nobi sick'."

"Small nobi sick indeed," repeated Lilly Loveless. She couldn't say if Britney was inventing things – cooking up data or really recounting things that happened. She would have sworn that things such as cyber sex were a reality of Muzunguland, and that even out there it was still a budding practice.

"She told me her greatest turn on gimmick for the man at the other end of the webcam or Skype – her electronic Kama sutra, which I am too embarrassed to repeat to you. But whenever she uses this, the man is sure to go straight to the nearest electronic money transfer service to send her some hard currency, for a job well done. Within a very short time, she has become one of the richest girls in Puttkamerstown. She drives a very expensive car, lives in her own house, and has a healthy bank account. Yet, she won't rest until she marries a Muzungu to take her to whiteman kontri..."

"The lure and allure of Muzunguland, eh?" said Lilly Loveless, contemplatively.

"There are no limits to what this girl would do," Britney went on. "She loves to tease the men at the other end of her virtual world like mad. Her favourite game is to play dressing, undressing, redressing in front of the camera. She believes that lovers do not have to touch physically to connect. With one particular man, I could see from how she recounted the story that it was exceedingly relaxing to spontaneously undress before him. She would take her light orange cotton jacket off to reveal her shoulders. Pull her orange sleeveless t-shirt up over her head, revealing her bare chest – except for a full pink bra. Unbutton her white trousers and unzip them suggestively. And she would dance like that, before him, until the music stopped. Then she would zip her trousers and button them, slowly, put her tops back on and bid him good day. Simple yet special, she dresses, undresses and redresses before the webcam in her cybercafé cubicle..."

"And the man, what would he do?" asked Lilly Loveless, flabbergasted.

"What would he do?" Britney repeated, a whataquestion look in her eyes. "His eyes would be glued to his computer screen, his hands active

between his legs. He would comment on the fullness of her breasts. And before you knew it, he was moaning with pleasure, reinforcing the link between them, and turning her on incredibly in turn. When she turned her bum to the camera, he moved his cursor up and down, lost in a world of their own, a virtual world made real."

"Amazing," said Lilly Loveless, cutting Britney short. "You really do have a way with digging deep into stories from the most unlikely angles, don't you?"

Britney nodded, happy to see that her work was being appreciated. She has always had a talent for stories, and especially for making others open up. At high school, it was said that if Britney could not succeed in making friends with someone, no one else could. It was gratifying to know that her capacity to be social and her nose for stories were now paying off.

* * *

Britney leafed through her notes, frantically.

"You mean to say there's more? What next?" Lilly Loveless was more than curious.

"There's this lady my friend of multiple identities was friends with. Then her husband also found her terribly attractive..."

"And so she goes out with both of them?" Lilly Loveless anticipated.

"Absolutely, she went out with the lady and her man" said Britney. "What the lady didn't know is that the reason my friend was never available on the weekends was because she was spending them in Sawang with her husband who always found an excuse to be away on mission on weekend."

"So your friend had the wife during the week and the husband on weekends?"

"And they were both pleased with her, apparently," said Britney. "Although I am not sure they knew of each other as lovers of the same person."

"Perhaps they did," said Lilly Loveless. "You never know."

"How I came to know about this particular story is that one day she brought me a note written by the lady to explain to her."

"You remember what this note said?"

"It was short and straightforward, and I can't understand why she couldn't understand a message so clear," said Britney. "So I read it to her."

"Was this lady Mimbolander?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just curious..."

"Not every curiosity should find satisfaction," Britney replied, knowing exactly why Lilly Loveless asked her question.

"Is there any rule in the relationship book that your friend is not going to say FU to?" Lilly Loveless asked rhetorically.

Britney smiled, informedly.

"Would you have a webcam relationship?" asked Lilly Loveless, not sure how Britney would react.

"I don't like the webcam, because it is cold and distant," replied Britney. And with a straight face, added: "I like eyes to eyes, feel the breath, the heat, the hardness or softness of the hands, of manhood. I love sweating and feeling the other sweat over me."

"How common is this phenomenon of cybersex?"

"It is catching on very fast, as more and more cybercafés are set up with broadband facilities, and as the economic crisis continues to give us sleepless nights. Things are tough in this country, I assure you."

"I know," agreed Lilly Loveless, "I see misery everywhere I go. Do the flying-shirts do similar things to attract Muzungu women?"

"Yes, but to a much limited degree, as it is a lot more common for Muzungu men to make themselves available for cybersex than it is for the Muzungu woman" said Britney, not sounding quite sure. "What I know for sure is that the flying-shirts target the women tourists who come to the beaches, and that some of these women do invite back to Muzunguland the beach bumsters that have swept them off their feet."

This made Lilly Loveless recall her Sunsandland experience. She expressed her gratitude for the session. She realized how much work Britney had done over the last several months. And that some of the stories she told today because she was in the privacy of her place. Knowing Britney, she couldn't imagine her talking at a snack bar about her friend dancing nude. She also thought how, in addition to storing her audio files on her computer, she should send them to her Gmail for safekeeping. Secrets are always safer in the hands of a perfect stranger, she thought. And she thought about how she was going to have to try to make some sense of all she was hearing, and experiencing and imagining in this fantastic land of Mimbo where reality seemed stranger than fiction.

"There is a Mimbo saying I picked up the other day from a book of short stories: A guest should leave when her presence is most desired, so that she can have a befitting farewell and be invited to come again," Lilly Loveless said, standing up.

"What befitting farewell do you want?" asked Britney, a broad smile on her face.

"Just a kiss," said Lilly Loveless.

"So be it, a kiss you shall have. But to show what a generous host I am, and how appreciated you are, a hug as well."

Britney walked Lilly Loveless to the main road where they hailed a taxi, hugged and exchanged kisses again. Lilly Loveless, who would have given anything to have a most wonderful lingering kiss at the material moment, thanked Britney profusely and tenderly.

"Now that you know where I am," said Britney, "don't hesitate to stop by any time."

"Are you sure about that?" asked Lilly Loveless with a grin.

"Could I ask you a very personal question Britney," Lilly Loveless stared into Britney's eyes, with her gentle, crystal clear blue eyes.

"Why not?" replied Britney, not quite understanding why Lilly Loveless was all tensed up.

"Um you like making love with women?" Lilly Loveless asked.

"Lilly Loveless... I like making love with elephants and alligators and tree trunks... even stars... And you?"

"Stars? I'll just have to learn that one from you," said Lilly Loveless, ducking into the taxi.

“I’m pleased you agreed to talk with me, despite the difficult times you must be going through, with the detention of your husband,” Lilly Loveless told Mrs Lovemore, as soon as they were seated. Mrs Lovemore had invited Lilly Loveless to her house, having declined the latter’s offer for them to go to Mountain Valley for the interview, saying something about how cheap and nosy the place was.

“Wiseman is stubborn and easily angered,” said Mrs Lovemore settling her well endowedness into the couch.

“Really?” Lilly Loveless was surprised to hear. “That’s not the first thing that strikes one about him.”

“It depends whom one is,” said Mrs Lovemore. “He has all these strange dreams of freedom in his head,” she added. “But he forgets that our dreams are limited by the reality of our lives.”

“HMMMMM,” Lilly Loveless couldn’t readily accept Mrs Lovemore’s words.

“Recently he asked me to comment on a piece he had written about the failing democratisation process in Mimboland. My criticisms – which in fact were more far-reaching than I dared say – were quite evidently not appreciated. That is a shame. His endeavours might be more successful if he would accept advice and criticism from outsiders. Repeated empty rhetoric and demagoguery will not convince anyone, and there’s no need for that either, considering the objectively fraudulent record that the regime has run up for itself. But a man’s character cannot be washed out by the rain. Wiseman will presumably always remain convinced of his own superiority in virtually all matters.”

“He is as stubborn as that?”

“I speak as his wife,” said Mrs Lovemore. “Others know him outside in, I know him inside out. He is a difficult man and attracts more than his fair share of headaches.”

“What a pity.”

“Now, what can I get you to drink?” insisted Mrs Lovemore. “Here we are rattling away with nothing to wet our lips, to quench our thirst. Let me bring you some of my special ginger drink,” she insisted before Lilly Loveless had a chance to respond, “Made with honey, not sugar, and just a touch of pineapple juice.”

Mrs Lovemore’s outfits were always so well-tailored. Not a millimetre too much or too little around her ample hips. As she headed to the kitchen, Lilly Loveless noticed that the patterns in the fabric not only danced but also matched perfectly across the back seam that contained her abundance.

Mrs Lovemore returned from the kitchen with two tall glasses, gave one to Lilly Loveless and balanced the other in her hand as she wriggled back into her spot on the couch. Her very dark brown hair was always cropped close. That dramatic face-framing coiffure, the gold in the colourful print fabric, and the gold loop earrings seemed to combine to make her brown eyes and face shine. Her clothes, jewellery and hairdo were homage to the glamour and splendour of her good looks.

"That's a lovely dress you've got there. Great fabric," Lilly Loveless complimented.

"Thanks," Mrs Lovemore smiled contentedly. "The beautiful green and white tie-died suit I wanted to wear to welcome you and in preparation for my meeting after our talk, has been pressed by the dry cleaners and folded and put into a plastic bag – as if it were a man's shirt! What do I need with these creases running up and down the front of me? They destroy the lines of the dress and make me look boxy and stiff. And, it's not like they'll shake out with wear. What's wrong with just ironing a woman's dress, respecting the designer's design and letting it hang like it should?!"

Lilly Loveless tried to make her face read empathy, although she didn't quite understand why Mrs Lovemore should go out of her way to dress specially for her, a mere student on fieldwork.

"Now, to your research, if I understand you correctly: You want to know about me and my husband? What about the other men in my life? You want to know about them too, the ones with whom I've had intimate skin to skin contact?"

"Yes..." said Lilly Loveless, nodding, not knowing her question would get opened up like that.

"That's a tall order," said Mrs Lovemore. "Where do I begin? What do I include? How does one summarise a life like mine in a single interview? We researchers must make those we study laugh."

"I know," Lilly Loveless agreed. "But degrees must be got, so we play along, giving the impression that people live their lives in square boxes..."

"OK, I'll do my best for you."

"Thanks ever so much."

"With Crush," Mrs Lovemore, began.

Lilly Loveless scrambled to switch on her digital recorder, a bit disoriented by Mrs Lovemore's abruptness.

She had scarcely had time to take in the artwork on the walls, the photographs, the sculpted masks. She was intent in sculpting her way behind the mask of Mrs Lovemore.

"With Crush, I was his first and he was my first. When I first felt a hot feeling swelling between my legs, my eyes got big with wonder. What pleasure! Different from the feeling when with cousins we'd put pillows between our legs. He was gentle. We were clumsy at times, and enjoyed it all immensely. He had grey, cut-short spiky hair that women found absolutely irresistible. I got used to them rubbing their hands over his head. He could smile. He could laugh real well, with his whole body. I can still hear him reverberate with laughter.

"Then, before I had my son – he passed away when we came to Mimboland – and Pinklie my daughter whom you've met, my breasts were a lot fuller than the leftovers you see today – things tend to go south with age, almost too big for my liking, but not for Crush's. He later admitted to only being attracted thereafter to big breasted women. I used to tell him he hadn't the foggiest idea of foreplay, as he would go straight for my breast and hang prayerfully onto it. And he would retort that the only thing I knew about foreplay was taking off his socks and licking his toes like a puppy. He was a cook and we would cook up storms. He would also smoke up storms with friends. I'd see the result the next day – fanciful multi-coloured apartment

walls. It's like I let myself get involved because I knew I would be leaving at the end of the summer for university. I left him my guitar and he did send me a song he composed that I never made head or tail of."

"Didn't know you played the guitar, Mum," said a girl with long black straightened hair who swung into the room and released her schoolbag into one of the chairs. Lilly Loveless remembered the phone call about Dr Lovemore's sick daughter that took him away the day they were drinking with Bobinga Iroko at Mountain Valley, never to be seen again.

The girl shook hands with the visitor and went to the refrigerator for ginger drink then returned to pick up her bag. "I have homework to do and a big test tomorrow, will you be able to help me prepare later?"

"Sure, Pinklie," said Mrs Lovemore. In a moment they heard a door close and music burst forth. Mrs Lovemore did not waste a second before launching into another story.

"There was this technician who used to fix my TV in my first year at university. He made love to me in a way that's never been repeated. He took me up against the wall. Standing, he pressed his middle into me as my legs wrapped his waist. As I grit my teeth I remember only wanting him to press me harder up against that wall."

Lilly Loveless smiled slightly and, wondering if Mrs Lovemore was as firmly built then as now, tried to imagine the physique of the technician who could manage the feat she had just described.

"The technician disappeared without warning and without trace, all of a sudden. Up to this day, I can't say what must have happened to make him turn his back on my TV. Did he find a better TV elsewhere? One easier to fix? I still think of him every now and again."

Mrs Lovemore saw Lilly Loveless turn her head with an uncomfortable look, as if her eyes were following her daughter out of the room. "Don't," Mrs Lovemore reassured her, "Pinklie is deep in her books and can't hear a word of ours over that music of hers."

As if something had been released within her, Mrs Lovemore continued recounting.

"I went once to this African students' party: lots of good food, beer, music and dancing. I liked the spontaneity, and the warmth, and the camaraderie with Africa and its causes. I danced several times with Wiseman Lovemore. He was doing his doctorate at the same university as me. I liked his strong upper arms and the way he held me when we were dancing. But when his hand travelled to my bum, I reacted by pulling back and slapping him across the face. Undaunted, I heard him mention to a friend that I would be his wife. And before I knew it, soon we were sharing an apartment. He insisted on visiting my parents. After initially resisting, 'over my dead body' my mother and father had each said, and after many dinners together where he had the opportunity to seduce them with his storytelling, my parents were all for us getting married. They arranged for our wedding at the church where I had grown up attending Sunday school. The day came, Wiseman appeared with two of his friends, and the deed was done."

"How lovely," said Lilly Loveless.

"Wiseman finished his PhD, I tried persuading him to stay and look for jobs in Muzunguland, but he was all passion and fire for his fatherland. He said he had signed an undertaking with the government of Mimboland

which had given him the scholarship to study abroad, to return home upon completion of his studies and to work for the state for ten years. He even convinced me there would be a job for me as well. His optimism was overwhelming, and I fell for it."

"So you came back together to Mimboland?"

"I wish I hadn't. He has always cherished building castles in the air, Wiseman."

"No sooner had we touched down in Mimboland than strange things began to happen. First our hope and optimism vanished. It took him nearly two years to be employed at the university. Me, it took a lot longer. Nothing was what it looked like. Everything could be everything else. My son fell sick, a strange sickness that defied medical knowledge. We went up and down and everywhere we possibly could, but didn't succeed in saving our son. Not even the medicine men, diviners and witchdoctors Wiseman insisted we visit could save his life. Our son died, and with him went my love and trust for Wiseman Lovemore."

"I'm so sorry to hear about your son," Said Lilly Loveless, imagining the pain Mrs Lovemore must have felt.

"Even before the death of our son, Wiseman had changed remarkably. During the first few months of our arrival here, he was still recognisable. When his friends came asking him to go out with them for a drink, meeting or something, he always made sure I was invited as well. 'Can I bring my wife along?' he would ask and insist that if I wasn't coming along, he wasn't going. One day, he returned home to say his friends were laughing at him that I had become like a handbag to him. They cautioned him: 'If you bring dat your handbag again, we no go talk for you.' I waited for what he would say next. 'I hope you understand that my friends are important to me,' he landed. By implication, his wife was no longer that important to him."

"How terribly callous," Lilly Loveless agreed.

"I got the message. But he had been leaving other messages, only I was rather slow, or should I say, too credulous, to understand them."

"What do you mean?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"One day I made an appointment with the ophthalmologist, the same one Wiseman had seen several months earlier for a new set of spectacles. After a few minutes in the waiting room reviewing religious publications on fornication and other topics, we were sitting eye to eye, she on her examination stool and me in a comfortable armchair. She didn't know I knew, but I knew she was the reason Wiseman had been leaving messages saying he would be coming home late. I had seen his car parked alongside her clinic after a couple of those calls, on my own way home. As I sat, I wondered if Wiseman had sat in the same chair for an intimate examination, and to appreciate the hefty ophthalmologist, from behind was his favourite, with or without her white jacket, it wouldn't matter to him. I noticed she was wearing trousers that day. She completed the exam and said my vision was 20/20 or perfect. She prescribed me an eye rinse for fatigue. On the way out, when I motioned towards the pamphlets on the table in the waiting room and asked if she was religious she said, 'there's much more to reality than meets the eye.'

"I see," I said."

"Yes, I know you see; you see well, I just examined you. You see

much better than you thought you did and you don't need glasses like you thought you did.'

"I too had completed my examination, of her, and in a way I was thankful Wiseman had chosen to fool around with a doctor, who was likely to impose condoms on him. And judging by her shortness of breath, she couldn't keep him around for hours, as Pinklie was used to needing both of us at home. When I was doing laundry before that, I would find condoms in his pockets and naively think he had bought them for us, because we were being careful not to have another baby before we could have jobs. But the condoms soon disappeared and were replaced by strange infections. Pain here, pain there; I would visit a doctor and come home baffled. Gonorrhoea? I had never known another man but Wiseman since we got married. He said nothing, did not complain, and continued as if I was imagining these infections. How could I imagine the painful urination and the pain around my urethra? I wondered what happened between him and his ophthalmologist. Did they see well to do whatever they did with required safety? He seemed to have moved on and whatever he picked up made me itch."

"I can well imagine how frustrating this could be," said Lilly Loveless, scribbling away.

"I began finding letters to him written by other women. Letters that proved he had many more lives out there than I could ever have imagined. I thought my eyes had been opened before, but it was only then that it really started to happen. I still have these letters, just in case divorce should ever be necessary one day."

Mrs Lovemore wouldn't let Lilly Loveless touch the letters, but she read out from them, without revealing the names of those who had written them. Lilly Loveless felt uncomfortable about not being able to see the letters. A thought crossed her mind: What if, knowing my relationship with Dr Wiseman Lovemore, Mrs Lovemore is doing everything to paint an uncaring, monstrous bastard of her husband? But then, what can I do? And, in any case, what makes me believe that Britney is more authentic in her accounts? For all I know, both could well be inventing stories for one reason or another. In fact, there's no reason to assume that social science research has ever been any different...

Lilly Loveless snapped herself out of her reflections and listened on, concluding that research is as much an invention of reality as is the very reality that it researches. If reality is faked, social science is doubly faked.

In the first letter, it was clear that whoever wrote it was deadly furious and wanted nothing more ever to do with Dr Wiseman Lovemore. There was a passage that particularly amused Lilly Loveless: 'Your masturbating sessions got me pregnant you beast. Incidentally, do you wash your armpits when you take your shower (fresh lemon helps severe cases), it might help the disgusting, he-goat stench around you. That is if it's not from your bottom, or worse still, from the numerous masturbation sessions. You never know! Stinking, insensitive, egocentric, randy, bastard.' She would never have associated Dr Wiseman Lovemore with what the entire letter accused him of doing. But, as they say, looks can be deceptive, if the letters are authentic, that is.

In the second letter, a woman writes:

'For some reason I've really been thinking of you these past two days, missing you a lot and it just struck me, not just the futility of the situation but more importantly its ugliness! Much as I've tried, I just can't make a good screw-mate and while I can justify myself for cheating if I'm happy, there's no way I can justify an unhappy association such as ours. I feel so bad every time I think of your woman's picture looking down on me and it's just occurred to me that while my man would find a place in his heart to forgive me for cheating because it made me momentarily happy (like when we first started), honestly I doubt if he'd ever forgive me for putting myself through the agony I suffer in my relationship with you.

'I therefore my dear would like to suggest that we make a clean and very final break. I know we've tried it before but I want to suggest that this time we really go back to before we knew each other, sever all friendship and acquaintance ties and pretend we've never known each other.

'I cared for you a lot, Wiseman, I still do, but there comes a time when drastic steps are in order. While ours would have been a blissful few months of stolen happiness that we set out to have, it has turned out to be quite the opposite. And I'm sure that you'll agree with me that what we have now we cannot justify ever to our own consciences, let alone to the world and that's just what makes it ugly. Everybody can accept two people who genuinely like each other and make the best of the time they have to be happy with and enjoy each other, but when happiness goes out of it then the world cannot be expected to be tolerant and because honey, I believe we are both very decent people who can't do anything unless we can justify it at least to ourselves, this is why I suggest we get out while we still like ourselves if not each other, pretend not only that it never happened, but also that we never knew each other for me at least that's the only way I can have it. You will know deep inside yourself that I cared for you a great deal and you'll always remain in that bit of my heart that you captured and it is because of my selfless feelings for you that I take the burden of ending our friendship.

'I do wish you all the best in life and hope your interview for recruitment at Mimbo goes well and in my heart of hearts I'll always be a very good friend of yours and I hope you can understand that I can't be anything less.

'Incidentally, while I would not have minded that you keep that pen, it is a present from my other very good friend and I wouldn't be able to explain its whereabouts to myself, let alone to him, i.e. my boyfriend in Sawang, the Customs officer you love to hate. Sorry about that.'

The third letter was from the same woman, still insisting on her pen, which must have meant a lot to Dr Wiseman Lovemore as well, for he did not return it to her when she wrote the first time. Mrs Lovemore read out the letter:

'I hope you don't think I'm making a habit of writing you letters, but I called your place this morning and besides hunting for you around the university, which doesn't go down well with me, I don't know how else to send you this message, which to me is very important.

'I had just finished talking to, actually lying to my boyfriend. I've never felt so bad in my life and I don't know why you had to put me through this. Anyway, I told him about how I'd lost my pen and actually how I suspected somebody might have stolen it and this is how he reacted: But how

could you allow that? I hope they are not stealing anything else of mine in that place. Anyway I will look around for the same one and send it to you, and if I can't get it as you know we didn't get them easily, then I'll send you mine.

'You see we had bought two look-alike pens, different colours, chosen by me, souvenirs of a tourist town we visited in Muzunguland, very expensive for pens – Mim\$300,000 each – and for me that pen holds a lot of meaning. In the same way as yours holds memories of a friendship I treasured.

'If you have any compassion at all for someone you once liked, and I think you did, then you'll give me back the pen but if you must keep it as you so insist, then treasure it for me as I myself would have. You know I'm a very sentimental person.

'I enclose the case for it which has no use for me without the pen and honey, I leave the rest to you.'

Mrs Lovemore was crying. Lilly Loveless fetched a tissue from her rucksack and handed it to her. These were painful memories, which to Lilly Loveless meant the letters must be authentic, unless of course Mrs Lovemore was one of the world's leading actresses.

"We could stop the interview, if you want," Lilly Loveless suggested.

"No, no. Let's carry on. It is quite therapeutic to be able to share these things with someone like you who is not a member of the community here, and whom I know is leaving the country soon."

"Thanks. I assure you that your secret is safe with me."

Mrs Lovemore told Lilly Loveless how tired of and embarrassed she was of repeatedly treating herself for STDs, so that she decided to discontinue all sexual contact with her husband. It was hard for him to take, but she told him all she knew, what she had found out on her own. She told him to have himself checked. If all the STDs she had contracted were from him, and if he hadn't sought medical attention all this while, it was possible he had incurred irreparable damage to his organs.

After calling off with her husband anything to do with sex, Mrs Lovemore did not immediately embark on another relationship. For one thing, she could not afford to handle men together with her quest for employment. Her husband eventually got his job with the university, but things did not improve for her.

"Now that you've declared a ghost town on our sex life, I declare a ghost town on my wallet," he told her jovially, but he meant it.

She threatened to report him to all those who mattered, the Muzunguland embassy included.

He laughed and told her to go right ahead. Then cheekily, he added: "If you want a plot to farm, I can arrange one for you. There are other Muzungu women tilling the soil already, like our own women do. The sooner you start facing reality the better." He left her crying, to join his friends or mistresses.

As usual, he would return with empty pockets, but with the audacity to inquire what there was to eat. To Mrs Lovemore, it wasn't so much the fear of losing someone he loved, but rather the fear of being ridiculed by his cherished friends and drinking mates that made it so difficult for her husband to accept her decision to jilt him. He therefore kept insisting that it wasn't

quite over, that he was a man and was simply behaving the way men do in Africa, and that she should look within herself for the modesty it takes for a Muzungu woman to marry an African and live in Africa.

"He just couldn't understand that he was no longer the essential thing in my life. Our relationship had ceased to work."

"He wouldn't accept it?"

"No, not at all. It's male pride, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

"There is nothing a man wants more than something he can't have, even if this is something he has given up before."

"How true!" Lilly Loveless agreed. "Men are very jealous animals."

"It was during this particularly difficult time that I realized that quite a few other Mimbolanders, some right here in Puttkamerstown, were married to what they love to call here whiteman-woman."

"And how are things with these marriages, if I may ask?"

"I hate to generalize, but it takes a lot of understanding, single-mindedness and determination for a Mimboland man to sail against the formidable cultural forces that make them totally insecure when they are not playing man the way little boys do."

"You mean the: 'Don't you feel secure in these big arms of mine' sort of thing?"

"Yes, exactly."

"There's this woman, Nicole, who finally had to leave for back home, not for want of trying to keep her marriage. She had married this Mimbolander during their student days in Muzunguland, the same way I did Wiseman."

"And they returned home to Mimboland? So you had a shoulder to cry on?"

"Not for long. After three children with this woman, her Mimbolander husband suddenly had this irresistible urge to marry a second woman, which he did. She was younger of course. Nicole tried to put up with things for a while. Her husband would go so far as to sleep with his second wife and then show up in his first wife's bedroom. He would caress her cheek as she lay in bed. She would look at him, knowing what he had just done, and say, 'What exactly are you after?' And he would reply, without even blinking an eye, 'Dessert.'"

"How creative of him!" exclaimed Lilly Loveless.

"You mean how callous of him," corrected Mrs Lovemore.

The two women smiled at each other.

"Either way, life must continue," Mrs Lovemore added. "At a point, Nicole couldn't take it any longer. 'My love is too precious to waste on someone who betrayed me,' she told her husband, and left. So, while Nicole eventually opted to return to Muzunguland with her children..."

"How interesting," interrupted Lilly Loveless. "The other day, someone told me it is very difficult to have the funeral of a Muzungu woman in Mimboland, because they always leave before they are buried."

"Was it a man?"

"Yes, someone whose friend was married to a Muzungu woman who just got up one day, packed her things and left, just like Nicole."

"The fault is with them, the Mimbo men," Mrs Lovemore defended.

"They should learn to treat us with the tender, loving care that made us marry them back in Muzunguland. Nicole has started an agency in Muzunguland with a branch in Sawang called MimZungu-Marriages, with the aim of counselling all those contemplating inter-racial and cross-cultural marriages. Her business isn't so much to make money as to confront all illusions and delusions with the brutal truth before it is too late. Her motto is: 'Be Picky: No Rush No Regrets'."

Mrs Lovemore confessed that not all Muzungu women were ready to pretend the way she was doing with Dr Wiseman Lovemore that they were married. Her choice to stay on with him if that would please and help him pay fewer taxes to the state, despite being psychologically and emotionally divorced was not a common option in relationships between Muzungu women and Mimbo men.

"I'm married to him only on paper, and during this time, I have come to understand that husbands are actually wonderful, if they are not yours," reiterated Mrs Lovemore.

"Really?" thought Lilly Loveless. She saw passion, intelligence and independence in Mrs Lovemore. Her words and eyes, her entire being, told the story of a woman who knew what she wanted. Wrong were those who drew on her appearance of marriage to conclude this or that about her reality. It crossed Lilly Loveless' mind that this was not a part of the Lovemore story many outside knew. Not even Bobinga Iroko, ferret as he was, knew this, which was understandable, for she couldn't imagine Dr Wiseman Lovemore sitting his best friend down to say, 'Look here my friend, I have been jilted by my Muzunguland wife. My marriage is over.' Pretence was the order of the day in Mimboland. That much Lilly Loveless had learnt during months of fieldwork.

"You probably have heard the expression 'Mimboland na Mimboland'," asked Mrs Lovemore, like a mind reader.

Lilly Loveless nodded, "Many times."

"The saying sums up everything about this country."

"I'm beginning to believe that, after several months of fieldwork."

"Even so, everything Mimboland has come to occupy a special place in my heart."

"I understand, no throwing the baby out with the bathwater, eh?" reassured Lilly Loveless.

"Mimboland being Mimboland, I did what I did to be where I am today. I don't want to go into details, which are not very pleasant. I hope you understand."

Lilly Loveless said she did. She wouldn't insist on aspects of her story she felt too private to release. Mrs Lovemore had already told her much more than she had anticipated.

"Apart from doing what one must do to survive, you probably are wondering how I've survived otherwise."

Lilly Loveless smiled. "Exactly. What a mind reader you are!"

"I can smell curiosity miles away," Mrs Lovemore boasted.

"You don't have to tell me, if you don't want to," Lilly Loveless pretended, dying to know.

Mrs Lovemore smiled knowingly.

"There was this friend of mine," she began. "He is late now. A

sensuous lover he was. Subtle and well informed in all he did. He had the most beautiful forearms I've ever seen. Delicate, textured. I could become mesmerized looking at them, exploring them day dreamingly with my fingers. Believe it or not, I was particularly attracted to his underarms."

"Really? Underarm pleasures?"

"No kidding. My face would be drawn there. I'd ravenously bury my nose in his smells of the day and drink and slurp him in."

Lilly Loveless was tongue tied.

"I told him others could go anywhere but that only I should go there. His company was invaluable, especially when I most needed someone to work stress out of my system.

"When you go into these things, you think the first affair will be the last, but you are wrong. At least, I was. I had travelled abroad for a conference. It was Saturday and we didn't have a meeting until 10am. By 8am I had finished breakfast at the small family run hotel and, from a low padded bench-like chair against the window in the hotel lobby, was reading a novel I had found on the plane and following the news on the television. Before long, I felt someone sit down next to me. From the cologne, I could tell it was a man. I could feel him staring at me. When I looked up, he asked what I was reading."

"How convenient."

"I turned the book cover for him to see and noticed his long eyelashes. 'A book about football,' he exclaimed. 'I used to play for the national team, and I've come here to prepare the Africa Cup for them.' I could make out his pidgin and a glance at his chest and arms confirmed he was sporty. We continued chatting. I could tell what he was after. I took my thumb out of the book, looked him directly in the eyes and said, 'I have to go back upstairs before my 10am meeting.' I gave him my room number, said he was welcome to come up and stood up. He remained seated, reflected and said he would be up. Sure enough, I heard a tap on my door a couple of minutes after I closed it. After some mischievous smiling and mindless banter, we were in each other's arms, then undressing each other ... and more. It's hard for someone to satisfy a woman the first time he is with her, but it seemed this man was used to satisfying women. He sensed every little unspoken desire."

"Like a good shop attendant?"

"I guess you could say that," replied Mrs Lovemore, detecting the mischievousness in the eyes of Lilly Loveless. "When I felt him wanting to come, I took him in my mouth then used my hands. I figured both of us were unprepared and without condoms. Afterwards we rested in each other's arms. I asked if he was surprised I invited him up right away. He explained that he had hesitated because he didn't want me to think he was a certain type of person. He said he had foreseen a longer scenario in which he would invite me to dinner first and he suggested we still go for dinner. I explained I already had plans but would be back by 10pm. He said he would tap on my door at 10.30pm."

"How romantic to be intimate with a perfect stranger at a hotel where no one knows you!" screamed Lilly Loveless, her eyes lost in the distance as her mind fantasized.

"I said I had to dress for my meeting. He dressed and gave me a 'see

you later' kiss. That evening was magnificent – long drawn out lovemaking during a Bollywood love story on TV – except for our communication problem. He didn't understand when I asked him to come outside. Unprotected sex!"

"You seldom get it right in these things and situations, however well you rehearse, do you?" Lilly Loveless perfectly understood this all too common a problem.

"In the morning he woke me for my meetings. I suggested he stop by the pharmacy during the day and pick up some condoms if we were to see each other that evening. When I returned to the hotel in the evening, he greeted me in the hallway. I asked about the condoms. He shook his head, indicating he had not done anything about that. So I explained I had plans and went to my room and ordered dinner from room service."

"It is a terrible experience to be forced to remember an encounter you wanted to forget immediately after, just because the absence of a condom and the force of the heat of the moment propel one to throw caution to the wind for one split second," said Lilly Loveless.

Mrs Lovemore could sense a partner in crime here. "What was really peculiar is that when I returned to Puttkamerstown, after a couple of days I developed red spots on both hands. I was nervous and started reading and suspected I had got syphilis. The doctor at Mount Rebecca Hospital merely laughed, saying syphilis does not develop overnight. I realized later that the spots must have come just from stress. They never ever came back. I did have an HIV test two weeks later then another six months later. Both were negative. I was so relieved and vowed never again."

"Never again to have an affair?"

"No, never again to allow such miscommunication and take such risks. I also resolved always to travel with condoms, just in case.

"I was getting ready for the airport, and a colleague at the conference was helping put my suitcases in the trunk of a taxi, when he tapped my shoulder and said someone was trying to get my attention. I turned to look. My former football player, his chest filling a third storey window, was waving energetically and wishing me safe travels. I waved back, with a big smile I imagine. I had finished the lost and found book I had been reading and ran it into the receptionist for him. To this day I cannot recall his name, just how he devoured my feet so-o-o-o sensuously."

Mrs Lovemore finished her ginger drink in one last gulp. Lilly Loveless sipped hers and noted that Mrs Lovemore was a bit flushed. She moved eagerly into another story.

"I found this tall intriguing man one day looking too intensely at me. I didn't even look away disapprovingly. I just ignored the advances from a distance, remaining indifferent. Until I couldn't ignore his weight on top of me as he pressed my back up against the rocks of a beach just outside Sawang, on the way to Nyamandem. I felt we might slide down the cliff at any moment into the sea. I urged him into the car so I could get away from his increasingly aggressive advances. And there, he put his hand between my legs and implored. Had we not been drinking earlier, I could have convinced him to drop me off at the hotel and head home. As it was, I became one more addition to a long string of his identity beads, strung anxiously with women."

"Good expression," murmured Lilly Loveless, more to herself as she

didn't want to disturb the flow of the story.

"Later the next evening he explained that the place where we had danced wildly the night before had burnt down during the day. He claimed we were kindred spirits and perhaps, in a way, we were. Both endowed with a terrible and sometimes uncontrollable passion for life," Mrs Lovemore paused, as if editing out bits of the story she didn't want to share even with a safe and distant stranger.

"Once, we stopped at Kandastick – a centre for traditional medicine – to get something for a friend of his to stimulate hair growth. I realized later he must have picked up something else there too. I came back from the bathroom and sat at the bar with him to drink my beer that was waiting. As we got back into the car and continued to drive, things became surreal. I still see the round face of a woman selling fruit who looked at us with a big smile, knowing she was looking at two people in love. But you could also tell that the wildness of our togetherness put equal parts of fright in her eyes. Even after he left the hotel room that night, my mind soared. When he picked me up in the morning to take me to the bus station, it continued, from the drugs he put in the beer the night before."

Lilly Loveless knew right away the dangers involved. "I hope you stopped seeing him thereafter."

Mrs Lovemore shook her head to mean no.

"Why didn't I stop seeing him? Indeed I was hooked, on something, and couldn't draw myself away. I remember calling a friend in Muzunguland for help, after he satisfied himself one night and fell asleep. From the hotel window, I cried out across the ocean. She smiled in her friendly and knowing way and said she saw me going down a steep slope on a bobsled and that if I did not stop I would crash."

"So why did you continue?"

"I can't quite explain it."

"So what saved you?"

"Reaching out to my best friend since high school, who explained that I should never drink with him. And indeed, as long as I respected that rule, I could stay in control. And I resisted him and was able to put an end to things, eventually though painfully."

"Good." Lilly Loveless was relieved. She had feared the worst.

"It also helped when he explained that I should see no one else while we were together. Trying to hold onto something by force makes it wither I think. And I felt his statement as an invasion into a space he knew not well. How could he act so wild and free yet make such a demand, and as if he were king? His hypocrisy and domineering ways succeeded in dampening things."

"Thank God," said Lilly Loveless, wondering if her kisser bumster of Sunsandland would have assumed similar possessiveness had she let him.

"I needed a little moisture around, you know, because our spirits were indeed too fiery together. I burned the open invitation with his photo he'd given me." There was relief on Mrs Lovemore's face, as if she was reliving the relief she felt then.

"I chose not to be around his unfocused energy that could easily become wild and aggressive," she went on. "I learned to hold a mental mirror when I saw it coming, to send it right back to him, without absorbing any into me. He thinks of himself, of his satisfaction. I could no longer stand his

unending raving, his instability, his sadness, his directionless searching."

"In what way was he directionless?" Lilly Loveless didn't understand.

"It's like he couldn't move beyond being a rebel, or move into ways of doing it differently. He attracts hungry women, like a lantern or street light attracts bugs. But then the night turns to day and the light goes off and the bugs have moved on. He can't hold them. He knows of love in theory. What does he really know of love in action? He's too full or empty with insatiable thirst. Is it because he can't get beyond himself to really love another? Wouldn't you say he and I are probably alike in our selfishness?"

"I wouldn't say you are selfish," Lilly Loveless was taken by surprise. "And I wouldn't say he comes across as someone steeped in theory either. Was or is he that learned?"

"Oh, yes."

"I see." Lilly Loveless was not convinced, but then, she didn't know the guy in person.

"He still is anxious when we meet, by accident that is. He cries out with his whole self to hear and know he is loved. I smile and let him know that he is, in a dispassionate way."

Mrs Lovemore related how good she felt just to be free from this man. "You don't free yourself from a Dr Wiseman Lovemore just to sacrifice your freedom to someone who wants to suffocate you the way a boa constrictor would." For a long time, she kept to herself.

Meanwhile, so Mrs Lovemore believed and was keen to make believe, Dr Wiseman Lovemore was painting the town red, jumping from one relationship to another, mostly with students, sometimes with colleagues at work, and once in a while with a bar attendant where he went to drink with his male friends. Mrs Lovemore got to know of things from time to time through gossip or when her husband was too careless to cover his tracks, as was evident from a letter to him by a colleague of his at the university, a lady she knew well. The affair between Dr Wiseman Lovemore and her blossomed when Mrs Lovemore went abroad for a month long creative writing workshop. Again, like with the other letters, Mrs Lovemore preferred to read the letter out to Lilly Loveless:

'My Dear Wiseman,

'Good day. This is the first time I have found it necessary to express myself through this medium. I do hope you slept well. In fact I am really sorry for all that happened yester night.

'Wiseman, what made me stay that long in your house, to the extent of disturbing you that much, was just because I got there and met your kid Pinklie miserable and crying. I was told that you'd left the house and wondered what could have gone wrong. With the awareness that no matter where you go or what happens (except out of town), you "do all to get back home early enough to cuddle your daughter before she goes to bed," I got really troubled. You may please find out from your nanny how that child had to cry each time I made an attempt to leave.

'Now, my dear, it was just that feeling of love and belonging that kept me there. All the while I was there (I don't want to think of the number of hours), I had this premonition which turned out right! I only feel sorry for your toddler. 'You had told me once: One of those students is very beautiful

and it looks like Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh wants to go there. I understand how much running around you always do with students each time they show up and you come home late. I am not out to watch your activities, Wiseman. I have just seen your line of appreciation and your scale of preference. You of all people, even to the detriment of your own child when you know your wife isn't there to look after her.

'I have myself to blame. I guess I have given too much, calling it 'love.' I hope during your stay in Muzunguland you heard something about 'child abuse.' That was the plight of a two-year-old abandoned by an apparently educated and loving father for 12 straight hours. You are simply shameless and this justifies the insults I showered on you. I felt like slapping the lust out of you, but I convinced myself I have no blood relationship with the kid I am protecting. First things should come first and your firsts are clear.

'I realised I had been relegated to the rear of your thoughts and affection. My attempts to persuade you to drop your 'student friend' proved futile. But for the railing, we all would have gone down last night, maybe ended up in hospital. It would have served all of us just right. Madness in its real sense, eh?

'I thought you would even show some appreciation to my neighbours by joining them in the rain when trying to free your car. My landlord's brother and a friend were in it while you sought shelter with Marionette, telling her such a thing would not have been a big problem in Muzunguland where the roads are all paved. You are simply ridiculous! I hope you remember vividly how much attention you were giving her not caring how I or my folks felt. And what did you do when the car finally came out? You thanklessly went away. I had to follow you to the car and say: Goodnight Wiseman, I'm really sorry.

'You have disgraced yourself! No thanks, no word, nothing! What impression have you given them of yourself? Educated indeed! I am scared of you! I guess I need to go to the hospital and have my breasts elongated to satisfy the animal instincts in you. That is probably what Marionette has over me. I thought you had had your fill of students but like my colleague Emmy puts it, 'Male lecturers always tremble, panic and lick the feet of young girls with elongated tits even though they always go in for those whom the real Mboma from Sawang and Nyamandem feast on.' You just lived up to expectation. Tell you what, these guys laughed at you, your girlfriend, the attention you gave her while they worked, and above all the stench of alcohol and filth oozing from both of you.

'Ah! Mountain Valley seems to be your starting point. Remember we also started from there? Let me refresh your memory: Venez vous inscrire. We are invited to register. First the lady suggests that you write a false name. You try and just can't bring yourself to lie. Then you confess to the guy that you can't lie but at the same time you wouldn't write your name in a place like that. You show him your national identity card and he understands, with a tip. You haven't forgotten all that have you? And where have you suddenly got money and freedom from?

'Hope you had a wonderful time! I'll always wish you the best you know. After all it's a free world, very, very democratic in nature. Where has all the holiness in you gone to? What of your daughter? With Mrs Lovemore away doing what you both do best, shouldn't you at least care for Pinklie?

You frighten me!

'I thought I could stake my neck and all for you, Wiseman. I really lack words. I would have cursed anybody who predicted such a treatment for me. Who says 'variety' does not make the world go round? You say I accuse you? So the drinks you had opened your buttons and dishevelled your hair? Since when did you become a ruffian? And your goggles, where did you keep them to be groping like a bat? I hope you didn't sacrifice them to the excitement and passion of elongated breasts? No one would have believed that you ever found yourself between my legs. Marionette surely did not guess. Congratulations!!! It was nightmarish to me.

'And now that you have been so sweet to Marionette through soft words, attention, care and all the like, you suddenly found it necessary to carry my poor child and come to lay a complaint.

'I weep because Winston in all his madness will do all to keep me pleased. A similar thing had happened but I was given all the attention that I did not even deserve. I cannot even face my sisters and neighbours, not after all the Wiseman, Wissy, Wise – that has become my household word. Last night I needed you more than ever and I expressed this openly, just to get rejected. Do I call it embarrassing?

'You have made love to me in and out, mouth and cunt, wet and dry. I have had to serve you, your daughter and even your house help. Silly me! You have always been protective over your interest, be it in any light. Do I talk about the pregnancy and its aftermath?

'Wiseman, I really fear my heart. I have not had a wink of sleep. How can I? There are many questions I cannot answer. As you gradually throw off your veil or mask, I find it difficult to reconcile who I chose to date and who I am keeping – though the two have the same physical appearance. I try to put on this semblance of cheerfulness, but deep down it's all pain and doubts. I will still accuse you of being mendacious, perfidious, crooked, and knavish towards your child and me.

'For you and Marionette, I accept that the defeat of last night had been ignominious, but God knows your daughter Pinklie is too young for me to sit her down to explain the reason for her neglect. But somebody would have to read on her behalf. I have made photocopies.

'My beloved Wissy, not after these problems with Winston, my reckless fiancé! You were my only consolation. Now you scoop filth from the gutters and smear me with it. I am so grateful for your attention and concern, especially as displayed yesterday. You seemed to damn all consequences.

'After all you can come now and explain to my sisters. I'll always forget and come back. You can hurt me in front of a new friend but not vice versa. Now you come here to see who? Maybe sisters suddenly regained their sight from the blindness that shielded your activities of last night right in front of them? Wiseman, I loved you and will remain forever grateful for the short time we had. Thank God for little mercies. It would have ended with a tragedy. Who knows? I'll try my luck elsewhere. Puttkamerstown has nothing for me. Stay blessed and learn to take care of those who care about you and those who look up to you for their little existence. Bye. From she who got little back from Love.

'NB: I'll forward the copies to those who I think should know.'

Unlike previous letters which broke her heart, this particular letter

pleased Mrs Lovemore, not only because she knew the colleague involved to be a serious woman, but because the letter at least meant that Dr Wiseman Lovemore was moving on, at long last.

Mrs Lovemore remembered well the trip she had taken when this incident happened. It was a conference outside the country.

"There I met a technician," she told Lilly Loveless.

"Another technician? Unfinished business eh?" Lilly Loveless cast her mind back to the guy who used to fix Mrs Lovemore's TV when the latter was at the university. The one who disappeared without trace.

Mrs Lovemore smiled. She was pleased with Lilly Loveless. There was nothing like knowing that a listener was interested in your story.

"He was tall and slender and walked with grace, like a palm tree moving with the wind."

Lilly Loveless thought of Bobinga Iroko, whom the description would fit.

"He didn't try to draw attention to himself. But that drew my attention. When the meeting room was abuzz with talk, I would follow his discreet movements as he went about to adjust the microphones and whatever else. His elegance was irresistible somehow."

Lilly Loveless again pictured Bobinga Iroko.

"One evening we found ourselves walking at length on the beach, talking, talking, talking. At one point when it got chilly, I realized his arm was around my shoulder. At some point I think we even held hands. We walked back and he left me at my hotel and went his way. In the morning, I watched him windsurf. When he brought his board back in, before my presentation, he mentioned how I was wearing nothing under my kaba. How did he know?"

"Telepathy!" Lilly Loveless shouted with conviction.

"Really?"

"You didn't ask him?"

"No, not exactly. Anyway, one evening after dinner, he dropped me off. When I got to my room, I realized I didn't have my glasses. So I went back downstairs to the reception to see if perhaps they had fallen from my bag when I set it on the counter to search for my key. And who did I see walking through the door of the hotel? Him! We stood gawking, doing double takes of each other. I explained the problem about the glasses and we went to his car to search. That's where he explained that he had left the hotel after dropping me but had to come back."

"You see? Telepathy!"

"He wanted to come up to my room. I was hesitant. We agreed, for talking. And the rule was that I would not take off my clothes. And I didn't, except for my shoes. He touched the only skin he could get to - my feet - and we drank wine. Of course one thing led to another. One proposes but the body disposes. He was all over me. Making love to me through my clothes and pleading, 'Talk to me, ta-a-alk to me.' He tried to take my shirt off, my trousers off, I refused. He could only get the belt off. Until we were exhausted and it was time to sleep. Then I put on a kaba. It was in the morning that his touches, slow and delicate, worked their way up my leg and woke me. He started to move in gently... only to be interrupted by a knock on the door - room service delivering breakfast.

"Thereafter, when he was working on the equipment and

connections, he would often say sternly, if I were to tease him, 'I need my blood to go to my head right now.' You could see him yearning, for composure."

"Fortunately it was just a conference," said Lilly Loveless.

"No, unfortunately it was just a conference," Mrs Lovemore corrected.

She was rich in experience, Mrs Lovemore, as she explored outside her sterile marriage.

In her next story, she recounted yet another conference experience. It was an irony that she went to so many conferences when her husband hardly attended any.

"It's not easy for me to get up in the morning," Mrs Lovemore continued her story. "At the same time I'm not one to want to miss breakfast."

"Me too," said Lilly Loveless, "if I can help it."

"So I rolled out of bed a few minutes before the dining hall was due to close. By the time I made it downstairs, the doors to the hall were closed and I had to sneak in a side door to join those few who were finishing their breakfast. I saw one large round table near the divider that separated the tables from the buffet. One glass of orange juice stood there. I put my purse down to claim the seat directly opposite the juice. At least I'd have company for breakfast. Would it be an elderly person with lots of stories to tell? No, elderly people would generally get up earlier, I thought. Would it be a tourist? Or a musician who had played into the night and was just getting up? Or...?"

"You have a fascinating way of telling stories," Lilly Loveless complimented.

"Thank you. And I must say it takes a good listener to bring a good story out."

"I listen because the stories are good. The stories are not good because I listen."

Mrs Lovemore smiled and continued.

"I went to the buffet and served myself some dark bread and berry jelly as well as a glass of orange juice. I came back to the table, moved my purse one chair over, set my juice down directly opposite the other glass and looked up to see... an Indian man, about my age, smiling widely. I can't remember what we discussed, but we did strike up a conversation about this and that. Probably I explained I was in town for a conference, and he explained that he was an ICT consultant working for an Indian firm, travelling around the country a lot, and living at that particular hotel when in the city. He was like my introduction to this new country where I had just arrived for the first time the night before. Seeing South Africa through Indian eyes was a whole new nuanced window to the same reality brought home until then by accounts in black and white. Strangely, we agreed to meet in the last afternoon, after my conference. He suggested he could show me some of the popular tourist sites in Durban and its environs at that time of year.

"I explained that I needed to check my email before the meeting, so he came to my room and tried to configure my computer to access Internet, to no avail. I sent him scrambling so I could dress for the conference and run.

"After a day of conferencing and a quick walk, we had a tasty meal, I think. We took the bus back to the city and walked slowly through different

neighbourhoods, back to the hotel. I was hearing about South African mindsets and habits, rugby, cricket, football and other popular sports. He talked much about wines and entrepreneurship amongst whites, blacks and Indians. Politics was prominent, and so too was complaining about too much crime and too little action by the government. Too many unwanted strangers in town, he said. As we continued our route, he picked up some wine. And, as you may be guessing by now, if you didn't guess it when you heard about the orange juice on the table, he invited me to his room – to watch TV and for some red wine. By that time, I'd expected something like this and did not resist the invitation. But I didn't suspect he would suggest we watch pornographic films on pay TV. But we did. The grunting and groaning and moaning and faking were like background music as we continued to talk. Images and words combined first. Then there was movement. He was slow to move in. But he did finally. It's like he wanted to make sure there was enough red wine in me first? Eventually, we moved from our half lying positions on the floor in front of the TV to the bed.

"He liked to be fondled, and didn't seem interested in penetration. So we fondled each other all over everywhere. He was sweating and seemed ecstatic. I enjoyed it. He was gentle and attentive. Later I left him to sleep and went to my room to sleep.

"I was surprised that he insisted on meeting me at a cybercafé the next day where I went for Internet after my conference. He walked me back to the hotel, before we had to catch a bus to the airport, me to return home, and he to travel to a company in a nearby city, Cape Town, I think.

"We had maybe only two hours, but he wanted more and made it clear. I was a bit exasperated, but cooperated. I took off my red jacket. He folded it carefully and put it over the back of the couch. We took to the bed and started fondling again, passionately. The excitement grew. He didn't seem to be concerned that his manhood was fleshy and neither did I. We touched each other all over, and over again, going in and out of ever more places, bringing parts out for loving scrutiny. At one point I found myself on my back, his fingers between my legs. He was looking into my eyes, and bringing me pleasure, hungry pleasure. I was breathing deeply, and squeezing his fingers, as I urged for more. I could feel my eyeballs roll inward and my lids close. I was drawing him into me, with gentle forcefulness... He was a master craftsman... He did everything right... He brought the woman out of me, so many times, easily.

"When finally I relaxed and opened my eyes, he was smiling at least three times as big as when I discovered him as my breakfast companion the morning before. We could say he was glowing. I lifted myself onto my elbow and moved to the side. He took my place on the bed. And I started to fondle him all over, between his legs and everywhere. I massaged him. And he urged me on, without words. I couldn't stop. I kept on and on. I felt him going to a far away place, like an inflated balloon ... as a grin came over his closed eyes. And I couldn't resist sharing in his grin as he relaxed totally. I did the same for a moment by his side. Until he jumped from bed to give me my jacket and explained that we had to get quickly to the bus. Our quickie had taken longer than anticipated."

Lilly Loveless giggled.

"As we stood there together, each with one hand on the red jacket, we

looked at the bed, to discover a big red circle of blood on the sheets – two or three times larger than both of my buttocks put together. We were awed. Neither of us had noticed that I had started my period. His red wine and ins and outs had certainly helped bring the colour out.”

“The bus, don’t forget to catch the bus,” Lilly Loveless reminded her as if the action was still unfolding before her very eyes.

“Before dressing he quickly took the sheets off the bed and put them into the hamper. He said he wondered what the maid would think when she saw the sheets.”

“And the bus, were you in time for the bus?”

Mrs Lovemore nodded. “On the bus I slept on his shoulder. At the airport we each got our separate boarding passes then went outside because he wanted to smoke a cigarette. When I asked him what he liked most about our being together, he said when I put my head on his shoulder to sleep on the way to the airport. His parting gift to me was a book on Kama Sutra, on the title page of which he had inscribed: ‘unlock the secrets of passion and desire’.”

Lilly Loveless could see this particular encounter, brief though it was, had meant a lot to Mrs Lovemore, whose eyes and entire body exuded sweet memories of what happened in Durban, South Africa during those two days.

Just then, Mrs Lovemore’s cell phone rang, she took a quick look at the details of the caller, smiled, and said, “Sorry, I can’t ignore this one, and I can’t answer it in your presence either.”

Lilly Loveless got the message, excused herself, and went out to the garden, “to stretch my legs,” she said. A strange thought crossed her mind. Could it be Bobinga Iroko calling? That would be more than a stab in the back, she dismissed the thought.

From the garden where Lilly loveless paced up and down, half admiring the flowers, half thinking of the richness of the interview, she could see Mrs Lovemore moving excitedly as she spoke into her cute little cell phone. Even from that distance, Lilly Loveless could tell her cotton print fabric outfit was impeccably tailored – not one extra millimetre on either side of her hips. Everything fitted so well. Lilly Loveless could see the touches of gold on the outfit flicker as Mrs Lovemore moved around to the tune of the excitement generated by the phone call. The gold in the fabric combined with the call and her inner *joie de vivre* made her face glow in a subtle yet remarkable way. There was something about Mrs Lovemore's gold hoops earrings that took negative attention away from the robust roundness of her face. Mrs Lovemore knew how to bring out the best in her, and Lilly Loveless was convinced she had what it took to bring out the best in others as well. Here she was – Lilly Loveless for example – who felt at her best as a researcher, getting Mrs Lovemore to confide so readily and openly. But why wasn't she able to make Mr Wiseman Lovemore shine just as well? Was it the death of their son that had cast an irremovable shadow on the place he must have inhabited in her heart?

The phone call took nearly an hour, but it left Mrs Lovemore feeling freshly massaged – she shimmered with oiliness of someone in love. Lilly Loveless did not even try to ask with her eyes; she instinctively knew that this was a call the details of which Mrs Lovemore was not in a hurry to share. She dared to think though, could it be Dr Simba Spineless the Reg who called, the man whom it was rumoured had fathered her daughter and who, because he knew he knew, was making life so difficult for Dr Wiseman Lovemore, social father to his biological daughter? Whoever it was, Lilly Loveless was not going to risk things by pushing things.

Instead, she returned to Mrs Lovemore's pre-prepared basket which was not yet empty. She was ready to sacrifice every other appointment to listen on. They took a short break, fetched more drinks, chatted a bit about the capricious weather, and on how much Puttkamerstown reminded them of Muzunguland weather-wise at this time of year.

Then Mrs Lovemore resumed her story.

"I don't plan to get intimate with perfect strangers at meetings. It just happens. In a neighbouring country, after my meetings, I went to the market to buy wrappers for a friend who has a boutique here in Puttkamerstown. I bought a few here and there, but didn't really get into buying in bulk until arriving at a round building near the centre of the market. There was an open space in the middle of the covered structure, with stalls all around it. Each stall was triangular and small. Merchandise was packed in and sometimes buried deep. It was up to the seller to discern what each passer-by was seeking and propose accordingly. I happened upon one young man who seemed to be in the mood to sell. I bought one, two, three wrappers. He was willing to negotiate. And this I appreciated. So we continued. As time went on, he further demonstrated his knack for selling. He was good at knowing what I was after, and how to talk me into more. We were both smiling and enjoying the process. He was making money. I was spending someone else's.

As he unburied more and more choices, the space between us became smaller and smaller. The air was heavy and you had to breathe deeply to get some. As he turned to and fro, his elbow would rub up against me. He would bend to search for something special and I would have to back up to make room. I thought I would lose my balance and tumble with an avalanche of wrappers. It was becoming overwhelming. I was getting light headed. I had to release myself. He bagged my purchases, slowly. In handing me the bulging blue Ghana-Must-Go bag reluctantly, he invited me to stop by the next day... for tea."

Lilly Loveless smiled her fantasy to life. Sexy and juicy story, she thought.

Smart girl, Mrs Lovemore acknowledged with mischievous eyes, before passing to her next story.

"There is this one friend, a renowned playwright that I met, one rainy night, in a hotel lobby during a conference in Nyamandem, where he lectures at one of the universities."

"You and conferences," Lilly Loveless remarked. She resisted the temptation of calling her a frequent flyer academic, about whom Bobinga Iroko was very disparaging in his criticism, saying they were more interested in flying around like cockroaches than in doing research of quality. He said their real value came more from the frequent flyer miles they accumulated than in anything they researched or presented. They were therefore a serious danger to scholars who thought and did otherwise. To mention it would have been to run the risk of sending Mrs Lovemore off another tangent completely, if not angering her to the point of no return.

"Yes, I seem to strike it lucky at conferences, perhaps because I am far away from home, perhaps because conferences usually are quite boring," Mrs Lovemore agreed with humour.

"Someone said luck is when preparation meets opportunity."

"I agree. I do prepare thoroughly for my conferences."

They both laughed.

"He beeped me on my cell one evening. I greeted him downstairs with a smile. And we went up from there and travelled to other worlds. Even from between his toes we could get to heaven. Being with him can feel luxurious at times, like being bedded in pink silk sheets and a purple velvet blanket."

This sounds over the top, thought Lilly Loveless, without saying a word.

"And simple, like living on a woven mat and not wanting more, except to digest his words, his all from time to time infinitely. Sometimes it's like a bubble bath, sometimes a spiritual bath: splendid, splashing, sparkling. When provoked he said my breath tickles the heart of his ears and the ears of his heart."

Sounds like Bobinga Iroko, Lilly Loveless told herself, in silence.

"Being with him is like being on a magic carpet. Other times it's like being on a playground, taking in the sunshine. Running and jumping from one delight to another. Sharing, smiling, sliding, whirling. Feeling bold enough to play with the sun's rays, bending them, shaping them, sending them back out. He can put me on the edge of a precipice with his voice, his silence, his look, his touch, his breath, his all. And take me into a suspended

state of lost time and space regained. Of holding on and letting go. Absorption. Becoming everything and nothing. His chuckles and laughter bring us back to our physical surroundings. His teasing is sometimes playful, sometimes pointed. He's serious and light hearted. Sometimes he says we're getting too serious and need to find substitutes for each other, but then he says only I can deliver like he likes it. Of course these are just his ways to try to keep the relationship salty."

How could this be possible? Another Bobinga Iroko in Nyamandem? Lilly Loveless could swear she would say the same thing about Bobinga Iroko, given the opportunity and experience. It was true that nature in its almighty wisdom produces nothing without its spare. Mrs Lovemore had found in distant Nyamandem a Bobinga Iroko look-alike. But why go that far to look for something that was right there under her nose, her husband's best friend? Perhaps it was precisely because Bobinga Iroko was Dr Wiseman Lovemore's best friend that Mrs Lovemore had gone looking for him in distant Nyamandem. It was interesting, to say the least, concluded Lilly Loveless, struck by the coincidence.

"An empty moment for him is not negative or lacking but opportunity. It frees space, for energy and perspectives, new ideas, even identities. He's a nothing-frozen man. All is fluid, fertile, in motion. Evolving, becoming. Being reconfigured and reconfiguring constantly. I like being part of this constellation. Pebbles and rocks intervene to adorn the path but no boulders yet."

Lilly Loveless felt like she was listening to music.

"He is not married, but he is not available for keeps either. He is too self conscious to fall in love with marriage, but there is a certain humanity in him that makes me sure he is not taking advantage of me when he says he loves me."

"Interesting man," Lilly Loveless commented. "Can I have his address?" she added, jokingly.

"I can't trust you with him," Mrs Lovemore giggled. "For one thing, you are younger, more beautiful and livelier. Your eyes have a certain magic about them. He just might change his mind about marriage."

Lilly Loveless couldn't tell whether she was serious or not, but thought it wise not to continue the line of conversation.

"We've agreed that distance will not disrupt our desire to have coffee together every morning."

"So what do you do? Pour coffee down the cell phone?"

"We make the cell phone our coffee. We SMS and call to synchronise the making of coffee, then sit and chat as we sip."

"Wow, really romantic."

"Morning cups of coffee have taken on a whole new sensational dimension since we met. Sometimes I yearn to feel a mixture of Robusta and Arabica grinds on my tongue and tickle his neurons as I submit."

"You really do know how to turn a man on," remarked Lilly Loveless.

Mrs Lovemore smiled, and carried on.

"He is somewhat other worldly - lives outside convention, inside no box. For example when I offered him a book of poems I brought back from a trip to Muzunguland he refused, saying he does not believe in owning or

owing things, even in the form of gifts. He offers me nothing material either. What he does is turn the world upside down and inside out all the time, which I find more gift than any. Whenever I talk with him, I learn something, I see differently. He is destabilizing in a good way. He doesn't want the false intimacy of cheap friendship. But he says our calls are like a lifeline. I can't ask for more, can I?"

"Seems like a most unusual Mimbo man," remarked Lilly Loveless. Again, she held herself back from mentioning Bobinga Iroko.

"Our relationship is founded on absolute candour. That has been, and is, more incredible than I could have imagined. Our relationship is as open and honest and straightforward and natural as those I've previously experienced only with close female friends. I've never been able to say – with absolute honesty – that I would be comfortable with a husband or a boyfriend reading any of my emails, going through my diary, overhearing any of my conversations, knowing all my thoughts and grudges and fantasies and secrets... and I can say that about my playwright friend. I've never been happier, and I intend to keep him, even if it doesn't result in marriage. After all, who wants marriage if all it brings is taking away the happiness I feel with him in our current relationship?"

After a brief pause, Mrs Lovemore said, "Love comes in cycles as life goes in cycles. Love flows like the breath, like the ocean's waves. It can't be intense and coming on all the time. Regularly, it needs to recede, while still being present, to reconfigure, to reenergize, to regain and come on again, with refreshing intensity."

"That's true," Lilly Loveless agreed, looking out of the window at the rain clouds gathering, but not letting this dampen her enthusiasm. She had refused to let the capricious weather affect the fact that she had found in Puttkamerstown and its environs the perfect fulfilment of her tropical desires.

"Do you fall out of love as easily as you fall in love?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Hmmm," said Mrs Lovemore, marvelling at the curiosity of this girl. "In my experience, men fall out of lust just as you get deeply enthralled. By now, I recognise the signs and pull back. When the initial attraction fades, I always treasure the essence of the other, even, strange to say, of Dr Wiseman Lovemore."

Lilly Loveless pondered how she could say that after all she had recounted. Feeling completely comfortable with Mrs Lovemore, who seemed to have few hang-ups, she asked how she could recognise good sex.

"Good sex?" murmured Mrs. Lovemore as she thought. "For me it is good if it comes back to me, later, in images and feelings. I can feel it all over again, days or weeks, even months or years later, you see."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes," confirmed Mrs. Lovemore. "Positive moments that come back to me, and sometimes provide inspiration during moments of creativity."

"Interesting," said Lilly Loveless. "So you have strong conjuring powers, then?"

Loveless and Lovemore laughed heartily together.

"Have you ever related to a man as a friend, without sexual involvement? A platonic relationship, I mean?"

Mrs Lovemore smiled to herself, as if to say, what does this girl take

me for?

"Yes, of course," she replied. "Right here at the University of Mimbo. I have a friend, Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh, very close, yet very distant, if you know what I mean."

The name rang a bell. Could this be the same Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh, the colleague who betrayed Dr Wiseman Lovemore? If so, was their friendship meant to take attention away from the alleged relationship between Mrs Lovemore and Dr Simba Spineless the Reg? Not wanting to distract Mrs Lovemore from telling her story, Lilly Loveless decided to keep her curiosity and speculations to herself.

So Mrs Lovemore continued uninterrupted, "It wasn't his small office overflowing with papers that attracted me. It was I guess the glint in his eye when he saw me noticing his artwork on his walls. The work spoke to some sensitivity within him. That's what attracted me. It's not like I had to see him again. I'd seen so many other people during the course of the day. It just worked out that we saw each other again. At lunch the next day at the University of Mimbo Café, and ever since then, we have been friends."

Lilly Loveless nodded to show she was all ears.

"In his office, when we first met, I learned he was too busy to get to what we were supposed to talk about during the appointment because he had been editing the VC's speeches. So, when I really needed someone to look over my paper for a seminar we were having the next day, I phoned him. My husband, who hates to see him, had travelled to his home village. So Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh stopped by after work and read my paper. Then we talked a little and he said he had to go and I walked him to his car. The next day I phoned him to thank him and shared my compliments that were really for him. Someone had said, 'Mrs Lovemore, you have improved your cultural theory remarkably since you started working with us a couple of years ago.' He has an ear for language, Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh, and is well grounded in theory. Some people believe that too much brainpower has brought about his early baldness."

"Every scholar needs a friend like that," said Lilly Loveless.

"And, after that, he willingly accepted to spend an hour or two every other month or so reading and commenting on my papers, and directing my attention to innovative theories. I'm so grateful.

"Once we attended a conference abroad together on 'The Future of the African Breast in Literary Studies,' organized as a twin conference to one on 'The Political Economy of the Itinerant Penis in African Scholarly Circles,' in view of establishing convergences and divergences."

Lilly Loveless giggled at the thought of a penis at a conference, almost about the only thing seen or felt of its owner, but came short of commenting on the reality of disembedded penises.

"It was in Zanzibar," Mrs Lovemore continued, "and we were lodged at a hotel with a beautiful view of the sea and I was desperate for him to have a look at my paper provocatively titled, 'Bobi Tanap and Bobi Don Fall: Mine are not like yours mom. I'm not 40, I've not had kids. Mine are buoyant and bouncy, not like socks drying on the line.' He said he'd after a session he was chairing. At about 6pm he phoned from his cell to my cell and said he was downstairs. I gave him my room number. He said, 'No, you come down.' When I did, before I asked my question, he answered it. 'I would be too

tempted to read you instead of your paper if I went upstairs.'

"'Oh,' I said. I was surprised. And I smiled at that sensitivity that had attracted me to his being somehow, the first time I met him. 'So let's go to a café for a drink, or somewhere for dinner.' And we did. And he did his reading of the paper and made a useful suggestion for me to include a section on breast ironing."

"What's that?" inquired Lilly Loveless.

"Don't tell me you've never heard of breast ironing," Mrs Lovemore eyed her curiously as if to say, 'How could someone seriously researching sexuality miss out on that?' Convinced that Lilly Loveless was not feigning ignorance, she proceeded to explain, "This is a widespread practice in Africa, Mimboland especially, whereby mothers use hot objects to massage the breasts of their daughters to stop them from growing."

"Why on earth would a mother do something like that?!" Lilly Loveless was perplexed.

"It is from fear of unsolicited attention by men, unwanted and especially pre-marital pregnancies, and under-age girls getting carried away by sex. As African mothers say, 'it is through the breasts that men determine whether or not a girl is ripe.'"

"But that could cause irreparable damage."

"I know, which is why I readily accepted to add the section he suggested to my paper, in the hope of drawing attention to this problematic practice."

"What else did he say about the paper?"

"Not much else that I found useful."

"What do you mean?"

"If he succeeded in convincing me about breast ironing, I wasn't going to let him think he could rewrite my entire paper. So I rejected his suggestion to provide for what he termed 'a more nuanced argument downplaying the significance of global sisterhood as the answer to all ills that women suffer in society.'"

"He suggested that?"

"Yes, can you imagine?" said Mrs Lovemore. "'You certainly cannot reduce all social interaction to a structured dominance of men over women,' he told me. I also disagreed with his attempt to water down the moral superiority I accorded women over men, convinced as I still am that given their nurturing skills and caring nature, women would always be better leaders, better organisers and better members of institutions."

"And what did he have to say for himself?"

"Of course, he argued, like every man in his position would, but I stood my ground."

"And that was it?"

"There was another point I also shot down, his audacious claim that I was guilty of 'sexism in reverse', as my paper was silent on the need to distinguish between 'male power structures' and 'men'. Kind and friendly though he is, Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh is little different from Wiseman or any other man for that matter, as even he shares their selfish argument that 'men do not hold the monopoly over the potential to dominate.'"

"So what happened when you finished discussing and disagreeing on your paper?"

"We went back to the hotel afterwards. The taxi dropped us across from the entrance."

"Tell me more," Lilly Loveless requested with enthusiasm in her eyes.

"I shook his hand and thanked him again and wished him good night, saying I'd like him to attend my presentation. For a split second our eyes caught. His were soft and gushing with sentimentality. He reached for my elbows and started administering the typical Muzungu-inspired three kisses on the cheeks to say good night. And, strangely, there was a fourth kiss on the cheek, and a fifth, and a sixth. 'OK, one extra round I thought.' Then there was a seventh and I felt there might be an eighth and a ninth. Three complete rounds, wasn't that... sufficient? But he continued. I took his elbows and he drew me in closer and we lost count. Back and forth, back and forth, not hurriedly, from one cheek to the other, we went. The night birds looked on. My cheeks burned and the next day they were chapped."

What from? His aftershave? Lilly Loveless wondered, but did not interrupt.

"Our lips never met, never have, and never will," Mrs Lovemore continued.

Why never will, Lilly Loveless wondered. Could it be more because of Dr Simba Spineless than because of the lack of spark between Dr Nosewordy Boiboibambenh and Mrs Lovemore?

"He walked me right up to my room. On the way he said, 'Isn't it nice to have a platonic relationship?' I think I might have had to look up that word the next day.

"And we've kept it that way, ever since. It's refreshing, comfortable. We enjoy seeing each other without being bothered by frenetic sexual energy. When we meet at the university, in town or outside of Puttkamerstown, we find time to have a drink, just the two of us, not necessarily to catch up, like you do with a girlfriend, but just to chat, about everything and nothing. I even allow myself a smoke when with him, as he is a chronic smoker."

"And Mr Wiseman Lovemore," ventured Lilly Loveless, "does he ever have platonic relationships with women?"

Not even blinking at the boldness of the question, Mrs Lovemore responded, "What I know is that Mr Wiseman Lovemore seems to be moving on, from home and the university and Mountain Valley, to Muzunguland."

"He's planning a trip there?" asked Lilly Loveless, surprised.

"No, I think he's investigating importation. I found one of those Internet love letters on his desk the other day, and the way he had underlined sections of it tells me he is interested in knowing more about this Elena who is 18 years old, 1.73m tall, weighs 63kg and whose heart is pumping in anticipation of the fire of her life."

"Did he respond to Elena?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"That I do not know, my dear. But I did."

"You did?!" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, and I invited her to stay here at the house. If she actually arrives, it'll add an interesting twist to your research, won't it?"

"Any last words?" Lilly Loveless thought she was emulating the way Bobinga Iroko would conclude an interview as a journalist.

"Last words? That's scary. It sounds as if I'm heading for the grave right after this interview," said Mrs Lovemore, light-heartedly.

"No, that's not what I mean, at all," Lilly Loveless apologised. "I wish you a hundred more years."

"Now you are exaggerating. Why would I want to live for a hundred years?"

"I'm sorry, just being playful."

"I know. OK, last thoughts... last thoughts....," Mrs Lovemore said repeatedly, as she collected her thoughts. "I'm always in love with life, despite my troubles. Men seem to come and go these days. I certainly don't go looking for them. I feel like I should be happy about everything, but I still struggle to be all the time. I'm not sure what the future holds. One day at a time for now, my dear."

"Thank you for a great interview."

"Pleasure," said Mrs Lovemore. She escorted Lilly Loveless out of the house, and came back to help Pinklie out with her home work.

Just as Mrs Lovemore was stepping into the room, Pinklie intercepted her with an observation that tantalized her. "Mom," began Pinklie, "I think that your friend Dr Simba Spineless loves me very much."

"Why do you say that?" asked Mrs Lovemore.

"It is not the things he buys me or the money he gives me," said Pinklie. "It is the way he calls my name."

"I don't understand," said Mrs Lovemore.

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different."

"How is that?"

"You just know that your name is safe in their mouth," said Pinklie, bringing out her homework for her mom to take her through.

Mrs Lovemore's mind flashed back, reliving some of the key moments of a relationship that she and Dr Simba Spineless had done all in their powers to keep under the carpet. One moment stood out: I took his hand as he reached for me, caressed the inside of his palm reflectively, making him feel me to the tips of his toes and said, 'With all we share, do we really need to ... make love ... physically I mean? Won't that ... take something away? I mean rather than add something?'

He was at a loss. He had done nothing but dream about being in my arms and me in his ever since we first met that day at his office when I went to drop my application for lectureship. And now, here we were, in the same hotel room, his favourite resting place, sitting on the edge of the same bed, after so many months chasing me, and what was he hearing? He knew he would have to go gingerly.

'My charming Muzungu beauty,' he smiled and continued, 'I can't resist you, try as I might. Your hesitations, rather than deter me as you might hope, arouse me, all of me, and make me want you, all of you. I am more than meets the eye, you know,' he insisted, as he brought his hand that I had released by now to my spinal column, descending slowly from my neck over each and every vertebra. When he reached the small of my back he knelt on the bed and moistened me there with his lips then did the same to the small of my neck.

I could feel his tongue exploring me determinedly as he revisited the subtle contours of each vertebra, this time with his lips sucking and smacking before moving onto the next. It's as if he was trying not only to arouse me but also to reassure himself to get into my core, to sense that distant strength

within me... His condom split, and it happened... 'If it's to be, it's up to me,' I remember retorting when he insisted we keep the pregnancy.

This was the first time Pinklie had ever mentioned Dr Simba Spineless in this way. Did she know anything? Had she heard something? Could she have accessed Mrs Lovemore's cell phone somehow and read the sexy SMS messages the Reg and others had the habit of sending? If a coincidence, it was too much of one to swallow. Mrs Lovemore was thinking. Was her past finally catching up with her? She had never taken seriously the saying that people having an affair believe everyone else to be blind, even though everyone else probably knows about the affair better than they who are having it. The time had come to get her act together. She didn't want her daughter losing esteem for her or growing up with a cynical attitude to normal life.

But Pinklie was far from through with what she had to say on love. "Mom," she called, taking up her head, "You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."

Mrs Lovemore was lost for words.

Britney was not a hiker and she had never cared about climbing Mount Mimbo, but she accepted to accompany Lilly Loveless. She wanted to go to Stop One and return, but Lilly Loveless somehow convinced her they should continue to Stop Two where they could spend the night. "All those stories you said you collected, you can tell them to me under the starry skies," she had proposed with bright eyes. "Ours might not be exactly the Race of Hope, but it isn't hopeless, as far as I am concerned," she added, in reference to the yearly international race up and down the mountain top. Britney used her connections to round up two sleeping bags, which the mandatory mountain guide, for a fee, carried for them, along with water and food. Lilly Loveless looked back and saw Puttkamerstown disappearing below them, but the view of Sakersbeach in the distance was the loveliest of sights from up on high. They made their way through cultivated lands that merged into the forest like missionaries desperately seeking converts. Branches fluttered with birdsongs that sounded like the national anthem of Mimboland to Britney's schooled ear. Lilly Loveless stopped and closed her eyes for a moment to appreciate the symphony.

It was a humid climb through forest paths. Lilly Loveless felt sweat beginning to soak her t-shirt around the collar and on the back and beyond. She saw the same thing happening to Britney, revealing the beautiful outlines of her plump figure. Eventually they reached Stop One and sat on the steps to drink water and rest.

"You see," said Lilly Loveless. "We made it this far. Imagine the view from even higher up."

Britney, panting, shook her head and wondered just how she had got herself into this adventure. Such exhaustion without pleasure she hadn't experienced since her secondary school days, which made her appreciate all the more the feat of athletes, who could race up and down the top of the mountain in a matter of hours.

The guide got them up and moving after a bit. The forest gave way to savannah then black lava slopes. As the climb steepened, the air thinned. They trekked slowly on.

It was when they arrived at Stop Two and saw the forest below them wreathed in clouds that they realized how high up they were. It seemed magical with the undulating valleys and crests and colours and textures surrounding them. From inside, their muscles cried out in pain, tempering or heightening the exhilaration.

The guide wanted to make supper before it got dark. He warned them that temperatures would plummet as soon as the sun disappeared behind the mountain.

After dinner they prepared their sleeping bags. Lilly Loveless realized it was far too cold to think of holding a flashlight and taking notes, so she and Britney decided to sleep off their exhaustion and get to work once the sun was up again.

Under the most starful sky they had ever seen, with the routines of Puttkamerstown buried down below and feeling uplifted into another world, closer to the heavens, they gave their minds free rein to roam. The night

picked up dreamy words here and there as they reflected out loud and exchanged stories: "what drives one to ..." ... "summit..." ... "Erupted unexpectedly..." ... "Broken heart..." ... "Light from stars long dead..." ... Even the night could not make sense of them, because the meaning was embedded in knowing the one who spoke them.

When Lilly Loveless and Britney awoke before the sun, the guide was already preparing hot water for coffee and they were grateful for the warmth of the fire. Other campers who had shared the rest-hut with them had already left for Stop Three and the summit. They felt refreshed from the night and grateful for the warmth of the small fire. A blood red sun pushed its way gently through blue haze with belated greetings to them. They shivered their welcome, knowing it would soon warm them.

After a breakfast of bread, marmalade, avocado and honey, Lilly Loveless and Britney took a short walk around and settled on a rock to work. Britney stretched her arms wide to shake off any lingering sleep, took a big breath, cracked her knuckles and began.

* * *

"Let's start with the story of Vincent and Vicky. They got married against the wishes of their families. Despite this they were both happy and cooperated a lot to build their own family. Vicky was soon discovered to be a high blood pressure patient but this did not deter Vincent from being the quiet loving husband. They were blessed with children and Vincent with a good job which took him out of the country."

"Does she stay or follow?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Well," said Britney, "since Vicky could not be transferred out, she temporarily suspended her contract and joined Vincent. All went well until Vicky started visiting home to carry out some projects for the family, in typical bushfaller fashion. She would come home and spend time with friends instead of in-laws, but she did visit the in-laws. Vincent all along had no objections to this and was confident of his wife. After some more visits, Vincent's sisters started writing letters to Vincent, complaining of Vicky's visits and the places where she spent time. They didn't like the fact that she was not fully under their thumb."

"Hmmm... a little family interference ... this could lead to trouble, couldn't it?" asked Lilly Loveless, rubbing her hands together and placing them on her cheeks to warm herself.

"Well," continued Britney, "the letters insinuated that Vicky was too free and liberated." The cold of the mountain was worse than the cold of being jilted on Valentine's Day, she teased within herself, an affordable smile on her lips.

"What happens next?" Lilly Loveless spurred Britney on.

"Vincent took the letters and gave them to Vicky to read. This then raised some conflicts and Vicky, since she believed she had no skeletons to hide from Vincent, did not refrain from the relationships she had. To Vicky they were all genuine and most of them were family friends, and Vincent himself communicated with them."

"Good for a high blood patient to stay cool," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Their woes came when they were transferred back home. Vincent's family members now did everything in their power to pollute Vincent's mind

against Vicky."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes. But this proved difficult, at least at first. The family persisted and eventually things changed for the worse with Vincent and his wife and children. Vincent, who had been so fond of them, started drifting away, cared very little about the children's education and now spent more of his finances on his extended family and relations. He even started off new relationships."

"You mean with other women?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes. To begin, Grace, a very close neighbour, whom Vicky quite often would leave to take charge of her family while she travelled, fell prey to Vincent. And she took charge of everything. Vicky could hardly suspect there was a relationship since she so trusted Grace. Even when gossip reached Vicky, she dismissed it all. But trouble had started in the home and Vincent after each quarrel went off to Grace, but to Vicky this was no problem.

"When the gossip intensified and Vicky could now get information about some of her internal problems from friends with details that could only have come from an insider, she took Vincent to task but he said nothing. Vicky then decided to find out more information herself, which then confirmed to her Vincent's relationship with and investments in Grace. Vicky decided to do something about it."

"What did she do?" asked Lilly Loveless, getting drawn in.

"She called Vincent's friends and some members of their home village and invited Grace to join them. Vincent was surprised to find the people at home and was even more surprised when Grace entered the house. Vincent was really shocked when the 'medicine man' he and Grace had gone to see to fortify them came in as well."

"Wow, Vicky had really done her research," exclaimed Lilly Loveless.

"Vicky had done so much research," continued Britney, "that she invited all those she thought were contributing to destroying her home."

"Hmmm... we don't see something like that everyday," mused Lilly Loveless. She thought to herself, one would have imagined that in typical fashion, they'd tell Vicky, if you can't stand the heat in the kitchen, get out.

"When Vicky finally spoke," explained Britney, "she wove a full story of why she invited everybody and the problems she'd been going through with Vincent. She talked about the parts played by the 'medicine man' and Grace but none of them could make a statement. This then led to a break-up of the relationship with Grace."

"Mission accomplished?" asked Lilly Loveless, rather surprised.

"Not quite," said Britney. "While Vicky was having problems with Vincent, Vincent's family was quite happy and those who came to spend time with the family, especially Vincent's mother, encouraged the relationship with Grace and Grace spent much on mama to keep her place. Vicky's strategy had disturbed them and they had to look for some other way to get Vicky out of Vincent's home. Vincent found a new love, Jane. His family immediately talked of him getting married to her, to challenge Vicky."

"They really don't like her, do they?" noted Lilly Loveless. "And Grace allowed herself to be disposed of just like that?"

"Vincent was already head over heels with Jane and spent much time out of his home, and away from Grace as well. Things were so good for them that he announced to Vicky he was going to get another wife but did not

introduce the would-be wife to Vicky. Vincent did not do any research on Jane, so knew very little of her life."

"Just loved her without knowing her? What do love and research have to do with each other anyway?" Lilly Loveless joked.

"Well, Jane was a mature and caring woman," continued Britney, "who gave Vincent all the attention he needed. When plans for the instigated marriage were going on Jane still did not confide in Vincent her real life situation. Much had been done and the modality was the next issue since Vincent had a monogamous marriage and Vicky had to agree to divorce him for there to be another marriage. Jane then confessed to Vincent she too was married and would need a divorce. Jane had left her husband in Muzunguland and was about to contract another marriage. This was a high blow to Vincent and his family but to Vicky who was already a born-again Christian, it was the greatest miracle God had performed."

"She helps herself, God helps her, what next?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Vincent was shocked. He got involved in many bad habits: drinking, spending long hours out of the home and really giving very little care to his health. He got sick. The doctors warned him to rest and avoid strain and stress but this was not adhered to so Vincent got worse and fell into a coma."

"Sounds pretty serious," said Lilly Loveless.

"It was, and Vicky faced the hardest and most tortured part of her life during this period. Despite the fact of repeated abandonment, she was still the one who cared for her husband during his illness. Neither his fair-weather girlfriends nor his cantankerous family thought he needed care and comfort at hospital. Instead, while she was at the hospital with Vincent, his family continued to give Vicky a tough time accusing her of his illness. They even insinuated that her witchcraft and evil heart had caused his illness."

"Of course they don't see their own role in it," interjected Lilly Loveless.

"Of course not," agreed Britney. "They even threatened her and started grabbing property by trying to send out tenants from some of the houses Vincent and Vicky owned."

"How sad!"

"Vincent finally died. Vicky's children stood by her and gave her all the support they could. The dust over his grave had hardly settled when Vincent's sisters went off to declare one amongst them next of kin. Vicky was taken to court but unfortunately for them, the court ruled in her favour. Vincent had left no document transferring things to his family. His wife and children were his priority and despite all the problems, he had not changed any document."

"Hmmm, so he stood by her in death but couldn't stand up to his family for her in life?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"You'll have plenty of time," said Britney jokingly, "to draw conclusions when you get back to Muzunguland. For now, let's concentrate on data gathering, haven't you said that before? It's warming up now and pretty soon it's going to get really hot again," rationalized Britney as she launched into the next story.

* * *

"An ex-parliamentarian in Pawa-Town was happily living with his

wife. One of their neighbour's daughters was always visiting his house. This girl was a graduate of the higher teachers' training school in Nyamandem. She was so close to the family that this man's wife could not doubt her in any way. As time unfolded, his wife who was a senior medical nurse and worked at the hospital was granted a scholarship to study in Muzunguland. As she left for her studies, the girl was still visiting the family as usual."

Lilly Loveless turned a page in her notebook.

"You will not be surprised to know," continued Britney, "that the ex-parliamentarian fell in love with this girl, the neighbour's daughter. Before the girl's parents knew about this, the two were already deeply in love. The man's children were traumatized because the person they called 'Auntie' was fast replacing their mother.

"To people who spotted them in hotspots around town and frowned on what they saw, she would retort: 'Do you have to be married to dance together or to have sex with each other? Do you have to marry someone because you have sex with them? Is age a barrier to love? The language of love knows no frontiers and has no taboos.'

"When the girl's parents heard of this, they were mad and said their daughter was disgracing them. But their threats did not disturb the love relationship. Instead, their daughter transferred most of her dresses to the ex-MP's bedroom."

"Just like that?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"There's more," said Britney. "She had two children while in secondary school, and the ex-MP was now taking care of these children even more than he did his own."

"Really?"

"It happens," said Britney. "All this reached his wife's ears abroad, since two of his children were already in secondary school and could communicate directly with her by email or phone. When she was about to come back home after her studies, she made all necessary arrangements to stay in Sakersbeach instead. Being from a wealthy family, her sisters arranged for a house in Sakersbeach, so when she finally arrived, she did not bother herself about going to Pawa-Town. She stayed in Sakersbeach where her children met her for a family union without their father.

"Stories that went into the air revealed that the new girl was the fourth wife to the ex-MP. Since the man was wealthy, it was believed that each woman came to eat her own share of the cake. But before this girl could leave for Muzunguland, the man's business was in a slump. The third wife, the one who is a nurse, now lives in Sakersbeach where she occupies the post of a director. Of her husband and her she tells friends: 'Our love is dead and buried, with not even its feet sticking out.'"

Lilly Loveless looked up from her notes and around at their surroundings and noted out loud, "So, she was able to create a new life for herself. Imagine if she didn't have those rich helpful sisters, though."

"Meanwhile," continued Britney, "the teacher is still in love with this ex-MP and businessman that was. People say he has used charms to keep her, since he knows he is financially down, and wants this girl to take care of him eventually. "The truth is, they're not completely living together because the girl's parents have never really smiled on their relationship," Britney concluded. "Her parents have always cautioned: 'kissing a Mboma can be

deadly.”

Sometimes, Lilly Loveless wished it was possible to go deeper – to know more about the girl, her family and what went on in her head. She also wished there was a bit more about the men and their motivations in these relationships. At the same time she knew Britney got as much information as she could and she really couldn't ask for more. The stories revealed a sociological phenomenon and, put together, started to indicate certain trends. Unanswered questions in some were answered in others. And the scarcity of reasons why men did what they did was, in part, a reflection of power dynamics between men and women in society.

By now, the red ball sun had fused with the haze, introducing orange streaks into the sky and taking the blue through a series of shades. Expressive expansive clouds hung nearby and hugged certain crests. Lilly Loveless hugged herself to send warmth from her arms down to her toes and looked over at Britney, wondering what she was thinking about as she looked into the horizon.

Britney looked over at Lilly Loveless to ensure she still had her pen in her hand. “Let me tell you about the neighbours of a friend of mine. She lives down in Puttkamerstown and her family has lived side by side for years with a couple with six children. The father was a worker with the palm plantation and was able to pay school uniforms and fees and supplies and transport for all six children. And the mother would earn money for food selling cakes, Mekemewel, koki and similar such items at the market. So, they managed, despite difficulties, even if they had fallen out of love already, until the man lost his job because of impending privatisation. He tried all he could: setting up a small boutique at the house, driving a taxi, looking for a new job, doing odd jobs. But he only had irregular pay at the best of times and it was difficult to make ends meet. Many are called but few are chosen, so says the Bible, which he now understood from personal experience,” continued Britney, her gaze still caught by the distant horizon.

Lilly Loveless remarked the distraction in her face. Could she be missing someone? Her boyfriend, perhaps? Lilly Loveless resisted the urge to find out, not wanting to take Britney's concentration away from the story started.

“So at this point,” Britney recollected herself, “he lost respect for himself and the family lost respect for him. He was no longer the breadwinner he had been. His wife stopped sharing the matrimonial bed and that was devastating for him. And, we don't know for sure, but we think he went looking elsewhere for someone to prop him up and to escape family pressures. This didn't help the financial situation at the house, because, you know, those women willing to prop up men's egos don't do it for free. They too are after something.”

“Pay for propping?” asked Lilly Loveless.

Britney wasn't listening. She went on. “He apparently started investing what he could get from brothers and uncles in his activities outside the home instead of in the children. At one point he left the house and didn't return for many nights. His wife and six children were left in the dark when the electricity was cut. So they managed with kerosene lamps. The worst part of it was when the water was cut. The woman had to come to the neighbours daily for buckets of water for washing and cooking. She had to appeal

directly to the brothers and uncles of her husband, explaining that their contributions were not going toward the children's school fees. 'There's a lot less to him than many people think,' she said of her husband.

"She was the one now doing everything to hold things together and trying to make ends meet. Other girls in the neighbourhood had fallen into prostitution and she was doing everything she could to keep her daughters away from that. She decided to turn to the church for help and was advised to be strong during this time of difficulty, until her husband could find work. She went to the sisters at the women's association. She finally decided to plead her case before a court of justice because she couldn't stand her husband depriving their children of their due, with his subversive attitude to responsible fatherhood. The case is taking for ever as famine and hardship threaten this woman and her children. We don't know what the outcome will be, but this woman is currently without hope. She now calls herself Mrs Triy-sep Nobody. Her plight is typical of many women in Mimboland today."

Britney rose from the rock and walked toward the horizon with her back to Lilly Loveless. "I'm discouraged," said she, "when I learn about such predicaments. If I were in a similar situation, I wonder how I'd manage." She turned suddenly to Lilly Loveless and said, "How would you manage?"

Lilly Loveless, taken aback, then noting Britney's tearful eyes, rose and gathered her things. Scenarios started unfolding themselves in her head. "Let's talk about it as we descend through the misty forest back down to Puttkamerstown," she told Britney, putting her arm around Britney's shoulder, with a reassuring lingering kiss.

* * *

The kiss by Lilly Loveless intrigued Britney. Like the first at Britney's place, it was warm and tensed, the sort of kiss a man like Providence would give her. It made her recall the very first time she felt weird towards another girl. This was in high school several years ago, and the woman in question was a nun. Was it her life as a nun that intrigued Britney? They were doing a common course in History. Britney found her intense. Britney would find herself staring at the nun during class and wanting to know her better. Soon they found themselves having a drink after class and discussing their lessons. The drink was natural guava juice which the nun brought along with her from the convent. Eventually, their conversations touched other topics. Britney would venture questions about life in the convent. And the nun seemed equally curious about Britney's former life in the village and life in the city where she balanced work and school.

Was it the 'forbidden' that drove them both? After a few weeks, they no longer sat across from each other to drink their guava juice, but side by side. She would touch Britney's hands and Britney would touch hers. She would touch Britney's leg, and Britney couldn't resist reaching out for her thigh. Britney yearned to feel her lips on hers, her hips on hers. Her chest pressed up against Britney's, who could no longer focus on her words. Britney would just listen and utter, 'Uh-uh, uh-uh,' as the nun's warm thigh spoke through Britney's palm. Before their next meeting, Britney negotiated, from a single friend with an office job, the keys to his two-room place with bare cement floors. Would she accept Britney's proposal to drink guava juice there, instead of at the little neighbourhood football pitch where they usually

went? She did, and Britney was surprised, after locking the apartment door behind them, to turn and find that her clothes had already come off. Britney thought, 'Wow, those big boobs belong to a nun.' She couldn't wait to get her hands on them, to drink her purity, to taste her Puritanism with debauchery and conviction. Britney took her to her friend's bed and they devoured each other. It became a routine. Britney asked her if she didn't feel guilty knowing that the Almighty was watching. She said that she wouldn't dare to undress if she wasn't sure God was having his siesta. Britney couldn't believe her ears.

History lectures were every Tuesday. Britney dreamed of Tuesdays. She looked forward to History like she'd never looked forward to class before. Visions of her naked nun filled her nights and waking hours. The nun started to call her when Britney was at work in the mornings, and insist that they meet at their usual meeting place at lunchtime. Many days were becoming Tuesdays.

Soon, however, too many days were Tuesdays. Britney noticed her productivity going down, not to mention her school work. She even noticed her sexual performance going down. It is not because a meal is delicious that one should overfeed, she found herself telling herself. Even her curiosity and excitement about convent life was going down. Her belief in things superior and divine was beginning to shake like a tree in a storm. The nun was coming on too strong for Britney, who felt overwhelmed by her obsessive desires. What Britney had found attractive and tempting before started to repulse her. She found herself fleeing the nun's looks in class, and fleeing her calls on her cell phone. Britney told the nun her friend couldn't give her the key to his place any longer. She told the nun she couldn't have their favourite guava juice after class any longer, because her uncle insisted she come straight home to help his children in primary school to review their lessons. Britney started praying for the end of the academic year. She even started skipping History classes.

Then one day, she noticed the nun no more. The nun was no longer coming to school, no longer calling, and no longer answering her phone when Britney called. Where had she disappeared to? Britney decided to find out. She went to the Principal's office where she was told: "That was no nun. She was a hardened criminal, an impostor who dressed up like a nun to get admitted and accepted around town. She was discovered, and the police is chasing after her."

Britney remembered thinking of the experience when the shock had died down. Weird though it was from hindsight, the non-nun certainly knew how a woman's engine worked, and exactly how to engineer the right feelings. But for Britney, there were times when she felt the absence of something harder, something hot inside.

Britney has never told the story to anyone, and never would, let alone to Lilly Loveless, a perfect stranger hunting for salacious stories. Who could say for sure what Lilly Loveless really was up to with the stories she collected, at the end of the day?

“Congo-beef steaks, kanda, towel, bible, exhaust pipe eru and watafufu; fried sweet potatoes, vegetables, read meat, stock fish, egusi soup and yam; okro soup and gari with dry meat and dry fish; or fufucorn and katikati...” bellowed Mammy Nyangaa – alias ‘Chop di chops, shack di shacks,’ reciting the menu of the day.

Mammy Nyangaa took their orders: gari, okro soup with dry fish but no meat for Britney, and fufucorn and katikati for Lilly Loveless, who, despite her frequent stomach upsets, was never tired of trying something new. What’s the thrill of being a researcher and living in a closet, she would challenge whenever she wanted to taste or do something crazy by the conservative standards of her loving mom.

They had chosen to sit outside at Mammy Nyangaa’s All Purpose Eating Place at University Junction. Not underneath the make-shift hut where it might be a bit stuffy. Outside in the open they could feel the breeze and at the same time were shaded by tall, huge mango trees. With her fork and spoon Lilly Loveless struggled with the delicious fufucorn and katikati, roasted chicken cut into small pieces and steeped in palm oil. Britney managed effortlessly with her thumb and two fingers.

Before long, Mammy Nyangaa sent someone to clear their plates and bring them orange sections that they sucked on to complete their meal. They went to a sink in the corner one after the other to rinse their hands, so Britney could begin sharing what she had collected.

Just then, a girl came in whom Britney shook hands with.

“What are you doing sitting here Britney?” inquired the girl. “You should be out there with the others, keeping the strike going. It’s everybody’s future, you know.”

“You know me better than that, Adapepe,” Britney defended herself. “I’m here with Lilly Loveless, who is visiting from Muzunguland. I can’t just leave her on her own.”

“Lilly what?”

“Loveless,” repeated Britney.

“You mean Lovelace... like in Deep Throat?”

“Lilly L-o-ve-l-e-s-s,” Lilly Loveless spelt out. “Strange name, I know.”

Adapepe smiled. “Then why don’t you abandon it? We’ve got lots of names in Mimboland seeking to be adopted. Just tell Britney what size of name you want, and she’ll arrange it for you.”

They all laughed. “Adapepe, crazy girl, always,” said Britney, shaking hands with Adapepe again.

“Britney, I understand you, but I’m not sure our comrades on the front will. So you must cleanse your face with them by buying them food. There are ten of them out there with me,” Adapepe told Britney, her gaze focused on Lilly Loveless.

“I don’t have any money on me,” Britney started, but was interrupted by Lilly Loveless who offered to pay for Adapepe and her comrades.

“Strange girl,” said Britney when Adapepe was gone with the food.

“She’s watched Deep Throat,” said Lilly Loveless.

"What's Deep Throat?"

"A movie, porn movie...aphrodisiac..."

"Doesn't surprise me. Adapepe is capable of anything," said Britney.

"Did you see her hair?" inquired Lilly Loveless. "How common is it for girls to shave that low?"

"Adapepe has always been a bit of a tomboy," said Britney. "Adapepe grew up with her mom whom her father abandoned for another woman when she was still only three years of age. Her mother is said to have told her parish priest at confession: 'My husband makes love so often that a new box of condoms can last several years and even reach the expiration date before they're used up.' And the priest had made the mistake of inviting both her mom and dad to discuss the matter, only for the dad to tell the interfering priest: 'If you think you can handle my wife better, you take her.' He stormed out of the parish house and has never looked back since Adapepe was three."

Is there anyone whose story Britney doesn't know? What would my research have turned out like if I hadn't met Britney? Lilly Loveless marvelled, as she increasingly did, the more stories came her way through Britney. She was a veritable human archive of lived experiences!

"We are very proud of her," continued Britney, about Adapepe, "and the way she shows men pepper, while pretending to share widely and lovingly with them her beauty. She is a serial mistress addicted to married men, since her secondary school days. She is always targeting the older truly married men, with lots of money. It gives her more satisfaction sleeping with them than with single men. But she harbours no illusions nor is interested in any of these men leaving his wife for her. Like my good friend Lilly Loveless, she doesn't believe much in marriage and is not in a hurry to discover its virtues, if there are any," Britney giggled and touched Lilly Loveless, to show that she meant no harm comparing Adapepe and her.

Lilly Loveless smiled reassuringly.

Britney went on: "What she wants – cash, car, cell phone, shoes, dresses, jewellery and other material possessions in exchange for sex – is what she gets, and always on her own terms. She allows no married man to dictate to her and loathes the Japanese handbrakes amongst them. And when she has got a man's balls in her palm, she mixes pleasure and pain to good effect."

"How does she do that?"

"By biting and blowing," Britney giggled.

"How?"

"Her principle is simple: 'Once you've got a man by the balls, he is virtually at your mercy', says she. But real success comes only to women who know what to deliver when. Knowing just what doses of pleasure and pain to mix for what ends is crucial in matters of love and life with men. Sometimes more pleasure is needed, sometimes more pain, but the balance is key."

Lilly Loveless still looked lost, although frantically writing down every word that came out of Britney.

"Perhaps an example would help," Britney explained further. "She has this man she has been playing ping pong with. He is married, a university lecturer, not that rich, but very caring. He is always asking her to marry him, but she never says yes and never says no, and yet doesn't want to let go of the guy. She tells him things none of which she really means, but the man is too infatuated to notice. So everyone is laughing at him behind his back. Just

before the strike, I was waiting to see this lecturer friend of hers with my assignment, when I overheard them at his office."

"Tell me more."

"She was telling him: 'I just wanted to tell you how much I am going to miss you when you are gone. You will say that it's impossible because of the fact that I have decided to call off our relationship. But I assure that I will miss you, I call it off with tears in my eyes. I am never going to find what you are capable of doing to me in someone else. You make me proud to be a woman and to want to receive continuously the same care from some other person.'

"The lecturer was pleading for her not to do a thing like that. He wanted to know what had pushed her to want to sacrifice their love, on which he had grown to depend so much. Was it another man?"

"Men immediately think of another man, don't they?" remarked Lilly Loveless, "as if women are incapable of independent existence. Sorry, carry on."

"No,' Adapepe told him, her voice strangely playful but firm. 'I am never going to replace the daddy, the elder brother and more especially the lover in you. I want you to know and remember that I love you but the way things are we will never be happy. With all my love, I wish you the best with your seminar. I know you will do it, because you have the capabilities. Two weeks will be so long not to hear your voice on the phone but I am confident I will hear it in my heart, and I assure you I will listen to it. Because I know it will direct and protect me in your absence. The voice will surely guide and protect me. I swear I do miss you in every sense of the word.'"

"She uses words like devalued currency, if what you say is true, that she tells them things she doesn't mean," Lilly Loveless commented, for more her notebook than for Britney.

"The lecturer, certainly confused, wanted to know how Adapepe could be saying one thing, and feeling quite another, thinking right and acting left.

"Adapepe told him: 'I will not regret it if nobody ever loves me the way you do and if I cannot be happy again the way I am with you, because there is nothing new to get or discover. I got all from you and what I regret is not really being able to get much more of the once in a life experience - that of loving passionately. Have a nice trip and think about those you have left behind. Love you always.'

"At the end of this drama, Adapepe opened the door, a bundle of bank notes in her hand and a smile on her face.

"Hi Britney,' said she upon seeing me. 'I'm going shopping in Sawang tomorrow. Want to come along?"

"No, thanks, I've got lots of assignments,' I told her and went in to see the lecturer who was in a very confused state.

"She looks truly formidable, I must say," Lilly Loveless agreed, thinking if only the strike could be over in time for me to interview Adapepe, I could learn so much.

"Adapepe certainly loves the good things in life," Britney agreed. "She knows that when she goes out it's money she wants, and if there's love, this is on her own terms."

"How would you call that?" asked Lilly Loveless. "Liberated?"

"More like beating men at their own game," said Britney. "As she often tells her friends: 'It must however be admitted that most men have little to offer. No sense of humour, no smile, no looks, no sensibility, no resilience – just flat like a battery without a charger. And the things they say make me feel like throwing up: Baby, here I am in the palm of your hand. Tear me up with desire and make me feel like a wanted man... You are so hot, you are burning me up... They are ugly and distorted, and leave even before you know they came. Na lie when we say all wata di quench fire... There's a lot less to men than women are made to thing. They talk tough, act tough, but are seldom that tough, as often, they leave you with little to write home about.'"

"She really is something, isn't she?" Lilly Loveless' fascination for Adapepe was surging.

"Adapepe na popo pepper," said Britney. "I recall how once she embarrassed a Mboma who took her out shopping as a way of impressing her. He asked her to choose any dress of her taste. Adapepe made her choice from among the most expensive dresses. On seeing that the Mboma tried to be clever: 'I no like that one. Why you no take this one?' he asked, showing her an obviously inexpensive alternative. But Adapepe insisted in a loud voice that attracted the attention of all in the shop: 'Which kind yeye man this? Talk say you no fit pay for that one, make palaver finish.' And the man was forced to pay."

"Excellent!"

"She keeps a diary with the names, personal stories and little sexual secrets of all the married men she has ever slept with, and in the order in which she has slept with them, the idea being to be always one step ahead of men who do not hesitate to pull a fast one on you," said Britney.

"Smart girl," remarked Lilly Loveless. "Has she ever had a regular boyfriend?"

"She has little time for boys of her age," said Britney. "A flying-shirt who had tried several times and failed to win her heart, finally gave up saying: 'You are someone who takes what you want. You don't bother with formalities. It's like wanting a man and not asking him before jumping on him. You don't let obstacles stop you. You fly over, go around or destroy them. If the door is locked, you enter through the window. If the window is locked, you break the glass. So I told myself, if she really wanted me, she would have taken me by now. And because you haven't taken me, I realized you don't want me that bad and I've backed off.'"

"Wow, tough girl."

"There is one exception, however," said Britney.

"A flying-shirt?"

"Yes, a mystic and a student of sociology, a militant for change and a very good friend of Samson Freeboy Bigmop, the charismatic president of the Student Union. He is known more by his nickname – Burning Spear. We are always picking on him and his thick long dreadlocks, which he buries under a colourful trademark Bob Marley hat when on campus as the university authorities frown on freak identities like his. He is always putting on shoes without socks, and his shoes smell like a dead rat. He is prone to accidents and loves the excitement that things like the strike bring. On weekends he plays in a band at the M&G nightclub, and dances like a burning spear on the back of an antelope racing for dear life."

"Is there anyone around here you don't know?" Lilly Loveless wondered aloud.

Britney shook her head in negation, smiling playfully. "Should there be anyone around I don't know? I'm a social being, keen observer of what goes on around me, and an enthusiastic listener. I'm at the university, and I work at Mountain View Hotel, where there's lots of comings and goings. What do you expect? From childhood to adulthood our social circles grow in chains, as we don't outgrow any relationship we have forged, even if we from time to time may have moved on..."

Lilly Loveless was nodding more than ever before, taking notes, a sign of appreciation that would have kept Britney going on the same tangent had she not asked: "Does he plan to marry Adapepe?"

"Yes, but Adapepe isn't the marrying type. She doesn't really want him to think beyond the moment."

"And he composes songs for her in the hope that she will change?"

"How did you know?"

"It's easy to guess, isn't it?"

"Back to Adapepe," said Britney, thinking why Lilly Loveless could not guess all the stories she had been sharing with her if she were so good at guessing. "But if you didn't know Adapepe and heard how she goes on and on about him, you'd imagine she'd found her Mr Right, her soul mate."

"Tell me more."

"Once I asked her what she saw in her Rastafarian Burning Spear, and she replied: 'My feeling when I am with him is that he sets my imagination on fire. I feel like I am dancing at the heart of a circle of flame fuelled by the pleasure he generates. I think his dreadlocks make him absolutely socially free and liberating. So I do expect him not to be like an ordinary man. I expect him to be uncommon, unusual, free of prejudices and more likely to understand me as a woman. He can read my eyes, my desires and my moods like a children's book. At the same time, I find him so sex-driven, so determined, so totally englobing, so... I have an absolute fascination by dreadlocks, and the freedom that comes with being dreaded.'"

"Wow!" said Lilly Loveless. "I wonder how she'd define love..."

"I know," Britney cut in. "We've talked about these things countless times. She says: 'To be in love for me is to be free and not to feel hungry. I can stay a whole day without food and I don't care. To be in love is to lose sense of ridicule. To look into the other's eyes and feel happiness that spreads all over your body. I just have to look into his eyes and we don't have to say anything, we just look at each other and we are ready for it. I just melt and he can come in, I am ready for him only, and he is ready for me. You don't have to say anything for a man you love to know what you are saying. Eyes say everything. And with the person I love, I could make wonderful love every day without feeling tired. Being with the person I love is only one intense happiness after each encounter...'"

"I like that... But more about dreadlocks another time, so I don't take you away from the story of Adapepe and the lecturer."

"Thanks," said Britney, resuming her story. "It took further exchanges and dribbling by Adapepe for the lecturer to know what her game really was. Sometimes, as Adapepe would tell her girlfriends, she used diversionary tactics not to make love with him, while at the same time

claiming she loved him the most. She would say things such as: 'Love making is not one of my strong points and never will be. I think we need to do something about sex in our relationship. It seems I am not able to satisfy you as much as you want to be satisfied by me, something which is well understood, and so, you feel slighted and at times angry with me. This usually presents me as being selfish, wicked and worst still, as somebody who does not want to cooperate or understand what it means to you. I know that sex has very little to do with one's feelings of love for the other person, but the irony is that it can cause the collapse of a solid relationship. Think over it. I care.'"

"It's amazing what your mind can retain and reproduce," commented Lilly Loveless. "You must be very good at maths and at playing chess," she added.

"I don't know about chess, but I've always hated maths. On the other hand, history, literature and language are my favourite subjects. I simply adore them," replied Britney.

"I sincerely admire your abilities and I'm pleased fate brought me your way," Lilly Loveless patted Britney on the shoulder.

Britney thanked her for her kind words and continued. "The lecturer was so furious that he decided to call off the relationship, which devastated Adapepe who until then had thought herself firmly in charge. He wrote her a short note which she was careless enough to leave lying on her reading table with friends coming and going: 'Loving you has been a most rewarding experience I shall never forget, even though I have finally agreed it must end in order to give your love for any other the chance it deserves. I sincerely hope you find happiness in your dreams and aspirations. As we separate definitely, there is one thing I would like you to always bear in mind: I take sweet memories of you along with me, which I shall cherish for the rest of my life. Knowing you was paradise on earth, but paradise that didn't last. Please don't come looking for me, I sincerely beg; for this would only renew the wounds of love I should be thinking of healing. And please, bury that nonsense image of Adapepe as a very good girl who is surrounded by bad friends.'"

"It doesn't sound like the words of someone who really wants to give up the relationship," remarked Lilly Loveless. "Are you sure they've actually broken up?"

"I don't know, but Adapepe has never been the sort of girl to go begging men. In fact, men irritate the crap out of her. Although she goes after older men, she often laughs at them as being no good, and as feeling terribly insecure and jealous in front of harmless younger men. She was dancing once at a nightclub with a Mboma who kept telling her not to look up because most of the young men dancing suggestively around them were thieves, in one way or another. To pleasure him, she said of his big belly: 'Nice shock absorbers!' 'You ain't seen anything yet, baby,' replied the Mboma. She can't believe a word they say, as a rule. She has seldom committed herself emotionally, because she feels men are not worth it. Aren't they usually the first to run at the sign of emotion? And if the satisfaction they bring, if at all they do, lasts only a little while, why invest much in them? Few of them are fun to talk with, and even more irritating, few believe they have anything to learn from a woman. So why waste time with them beyond the contents of

their wallet? Adapepe is simply fun to be with. I'll monitor to see what she is up to these days, that is, when the strike is over."

"If you can, ask her if she would let us interview her together," said Lilly Loveless.

Britney turned to her assignment with Lilly Loveless.

* * *

"Joseph and Carine were married. Joseph had a good job with an international organisation on a good income. Carine cared for the home and children. She was not highly educated. Joseph provided everything for the family and Carine was quite healthy and happy to be mom and wife. She belonged to the generation where the beauty of a girl was not the look of her face or the shape of her body, but how hard she worked. Beautiful girls were said to be lazy, so men tended to stay away from them when looking for someone to marry."

"I like that," said Lilly Loveless. "Is the idea original?"

"What do you mean original?" asked Britney. "I come from a culture where ideas are like a river from which people, animals and plants draw water freely and abundantly, all through its journey of life. Few care who comes up with an idea and few hesitate to share it. All creativity belongs to the community, as the river of ideas must never be allowed to dry up."

Lilly Loveless almost asked, 'that too, is it original?' Instead, she settled for taking notes vigorously, adding asterisks at the margins to remind her of unfinished business with ideas.

"They lived in a multi-storey building and below them Joseph had Bern."

"Just downstairs?" asked Lilly Loveless. "How... handy..."

"And," continued Britney, "Carine never suspected or felt cheated in any way. Bern played her role well, and Joseph threw all suspicion out of the window with talk of much work. He had one of Bern's keys and would even go to rest there while Bern was out. He lavished money on Bern."

"I sense trouble," said Lilly Loveless.

"Things became difficult because Joseph had to start investing."

"Of course," agreed Lilly Loveless, "demanding investments I imagine."

"So demanding," confirmed Britney, "that Joseph could not meet up, so trouble. Bern did not know what to do to put off Joseph, so she decided to bring to Carine's knowledge that he was unfaithful. One day, when she was sure Carine was home, she went up to Joseph's apartment to get her key. This ended the story for Joseph and Bern but did not stop him from other ventures."

"Involving wiser investments?" teased Lilly Loveless.

"His next venture," explained Britney, "was away from home but within the town."

"Could we say intimacy at a distance?" smirked Lilly Loveless in her usual style as she took a drink.

Britney also paused for a drink then continued: "This new venture created some sanity in Joseph. He more often abandoned his home for his new home. He even neglected his home and did not care how his children fared. Carine's family took care of her and the children and eventually when

Carine moved out of Joseph's home, her family set up some business for her."

"What did Joseph do?" asked Lilly Loveless, noting how much still the story resembled that of Mrs Tri-ye-sep Nobody.

"He moved back to his home with Ethel. And his mother came to live with them. Things took another turn when Joseph lost his job. With this he found a new home once again."

"A wanderer," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"This time," continued Britney, "he abandoned Ethel and went off to where he was being catered for. Ethel meanwhile had a baby. She was not working and could not take care of herself and the family."

"Oh, goodness..." said Lilly Loveless.

"With that," explained Britney, "Joseph's mother had to act as the go between. She went to Joseph every month for rent, food money and any other needs. Ethel had pushed Carine out and now she was facing really hard times. She could not complain because nobody supported her when she did what she did."

"As they say," insisted Lilly Loveless, "you can't plant maize and expect to harvest groundnuts."

Britney looked at Lilly Loveless with a glint in her eye, wondering where she was getting such things, but she concluded without commenting.

"In the end," said Britney, "Joseph's mother kept consoling her to be patient and saying that Joseph would come back when he found something to do to earn an income. But waiting for Joseph to return has been like waiting for the Mr Right that he never was."

Britney was on a roll. Hardly had she finished relating the ventures of Joseph when she said, "I just heard about Miriam yesterday. Let me tell you while things are fresh in my mind.

* * *

"Ted meets Miriam, you see, a fresh student from the region who has just been admitted into UM. Miriam is sharing a hostel with her friend while trying to get money from her parents for rent and to furnish her room. It is not easy to find the finances but finally she gets a small room, pays the rent, and gives some advance for a small bed to be made. She buys a small kerosene cooker and a few pots."

"So she had mostly everything she needed," commented Lilly Loveless, trying to picture Miriam's small room equipped with the essentials.

"Except a mattress for the bed," said Britney. "By the time the bed is ready and she's thinking of how to get the mattress, Ted comes into her life like manna from Heaven. Her whole life takes a U-turn. Ted trades in the small bed and places an order for a big bed. He gets her a more comfortable studio with the better than basics. He buys her a gas cooker, refrigerator and those things that would give Miriam above basic comfort. He does a lot more."

"I imagine he does," volunteered Lilly Loveless, anticipating pay back time.

"Ted had Miriam's keys so he used to stop by in her absence to have his meals or to rest since Miriam, he believed, was a better cook and knew his taste better than the woman he was married to. Well, more money was given for food so Miriam could be extravagant in preparing food and she knew this

was the best way to keep Ted around her. You know the saying about getting to a man through his stomach."

Lilly Loveless nodded.

"Miriam and Ted had a really good life together," continued Britney, "until things started becoming difficult for Ted. No contracts, no easy cash and with very little savings and the demands of his family, Miriam's finances also had to be cut and her lifestyle had to change. Miriam, already used to top crust living, could not imagine the drop in her standard of living. She all the same tried to manage for the first few months. This was too difficult."

"It doesn't take long to acquire the tastes of status, does it?" Lilly Loveless mocked.

"Luckily, at least from the point of view of her hunger, a big shot with a really posh car came along. Although much older, he was more settled and had invested. Miriam could not let the opportunity go so she started giving Ted excuses, complaining of late classes and too much work at the university. Even on Sundays when Ted used to send his wife and children to church so he could spend time with her, was now out; Miriam herself claiming a newly discovered religiosity as the born-again Christian she purported she had become.

"Miriam now prepared no food and had most of her meals out with her new found love in expensive hotels where they often rested."

"Actively wrestling?" asked Lilly Loveless, wishing she had Britney's lips to accentuate the 'w' in 'resting.'

Britney just smiled and continued. "Ted would wait for hours at her place and go away totally disappointed and consumed by anger and anxiety. When he met Miriam by chance she had good excuses to give. The little money that Ted could raise from small contracts here and there, he still lavished the greater part of on Miriam. But to no avail."

"Despite the fact that he had a family and despite the fact that he apparently rarely saw Miriam and no longer ate her meals?" asked Lilly Loveless, trying to keep things straight in her mind.

"Yes, he kept pouring in by now meagre investments. But eventually, Ted soon got tired of the hide-and-seek game, so he decided to spend the night at Miriam's once, and to his greatest dismay, Miriam was dropped off at an unholy hour by a posh car. Ted let her in and immediately bolted the door after her and removed the key. That night, he gave Miriam the sort of beating one would give a poisonous snake."

"Things took a real turn," observed Lilly Loveless, uncomfortable with the lack of imagination by the men of Mimboland in dealing with infidelity. To her, resorting to physical violence was too easy a solution, and indeed, testimony of the insecurities felt by Mimbo men vis-à-vis Mimbo women and the freedoms they aspired and inspired.

"A turn for the worse," agreed Britney. "Miriam's friends managed to take her to the hospital next day. She could not explain to anybody the cause of her swollen face and wounds. She lied to some of her friends she got involved in an accident but whereabouts she could not say. Ray, her new found love got to know Miriam was sick but when he came to check at her place, he could not see her. Miriam was hiding in one of her friends' rooms, because she couldn't think of explaining to Ray her infidelity."

"Catch 22," said Lilly Loveless.

"She tried for days to avoid him and finally gave up, so she was forced to tell him a doctored version of what had happened. Ray had Ted arrested and detained."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless. "He had that much power?"

"Yes, but Ted's friends managed to get him released. Ted immediately went off while Miriam was at school and emptied the house and left, saying: 'What does she want? I give her everything, even sex every week'. He left a note for her to tell the tycoon to furnish the house for her. Miriam again corrupted the story. How could she tell Ray the whole story without compromising their relationship? Thieves had broken in and swept her house dry, she told Ray."

"Ray. Ray of hope, I hope."

"Anyway," continued Britney, ignoring the comment by Lilly Loveless, "this Ray took up the challenge to get the house set up for Miriam and even better. As soon as Miriam started getting the house set up, Ted again surfaced and pleaded with Miriam for forgiveness and to get back the things. Miriam said it was all over and she had bought new things. She told him vehemently she did not want to see him again."

"And that was the end of Ted?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Not at all," said Britney. "Ted left but determined to deal with Miriam. He started spying on Miriam and beating her up whenever he met her with her friends, saying she stole his money his money and escaped. Miriam got fed up with trying to ask his friends to advise him so she took the matter with the gendarmes. Ted was called in for questioning, where he asked for some money to be refunded him by Miriam. Miriam then promised to bring his money on a date agreed upon."

"Did that put an end to things?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"No. Ted did not stop harassing her. He would make unannounced visits to Miriam's home. This forced Miriam to move house. Ted, not able to trace her new home, spent idle hours around the campus, when classes were about closing to get details of Miriam and her new environment. Sometimes when he saw Miriam he would follow her, spraying insults as he went along."

"He stalked her," noted Lilly Loveless incredulously.

"He did. And Miriam again went to the gendarmes but unfortunately for her the matter was now given to Ted's relative to handle. So when she brought her report and some part of the money to pay in, Ted's relative gave Miriam a good dressing down and insulted her well. 'How do you expect respect when you cripple a man financially in the name of love and walk away shamelessly in the name of love?' the policeman asked her with a tongue as bitter as bile. Miriam then left in shame since a whole crowd had gathered round to hear all that transpired."

"And Ray, what rays did he bring to bear?" Lilly Loveless continued to play with the name of Miriam's new love.

"Miriam decided to tell Ray who then took it up as a case. Miriam brought in medical documents to substantiate Ted's aggressiveness towards her. Ted was now warned and asked to pay some money for the damage caused Miriam."

"How long did this ping pong go on? What happened next?"

"That's all I know for now, Lilly Loveless," said Britney opening her

eyes wide, lifting her shoulders slightly and shaking her head back and forth.

Lilly Loveless, realizing she would not know the fate of Miriam, waved to catch the attention of the waitress so they could request another round of drinks. Those who had come to eat lunch had departed for other occupations. Others who came just to have a drink and shoot the breeze were not in a hurry to leave. There were multiple conversations going on, but it was at the table where Britney and Lilly Loveless were seated that words were being recorded digitally and stories and situations recounted to be studied in more depth later.

* * *

"Let me tell you about this married friend of mine," said Britney, bringing the glass of grapefruit juice that had just been brought to the table to her lips for a sip and setting it back down. "She makes her living doing manicures and pedicures. She goes into people's homes to do the work, you see. There was this one couple she would service once a month. But once the man called her on her cell phone for an appointment, when the girl knew his wife was out of town that month. Nonetheless, she stopped by to give the manicure and pedicure. When she opened the door he was in a towel."

Lilly Loveless burst out with, "Just what type of manicure was he expecting?"

"Well," continued Britney, "the girl tried to look the other way and set her equipment in the sitting room where she usually did the work."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Had it been me," Britney insisted, "I would have been gone. But anyway, the man had the nerve to invite her into the bedroom. It was only at this point that she fully realized the scheme. She collected her equipment and left as quickly as she could. When the girl told her husband about this, he forbade her from taking on male clients."

"I bet he would," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"About a month later, my friend received a call from the man's wife, for their regular appointment. She went. And she started the woman's feet soaking for the pedicure and was sorting out her equipment and assortment of oils, creams and scrubs when she started telling a story, acting like it happened quite a while ago with another client. She explained how this male client – in a neighbourhood on the other side of town she said – tried to lure her into his bedroom. The woman found the story amusing and wanted my friend to continue. The man was burning inside. He couldn't sit still in his seat. My friend wrapped things up by saying to the woman, 'And after that my husband forbade me from taking on male clients and that's why I won't be able to give any more manicures or pedicures to your husband.'"

"Hmmm," said Lilly Loveless, "interesting. Do you think that cured him of such behaviour or that he went seeking and scheming for his next opportunity?"

"How can we know the answers to such questions on an individual basis?" asked Britney. "It's only in putting many life stories together and studying them that we can understand better and perhaps start to generalize."

Lilly Loveless raised her eyes at Britney's lecture, wondering if bits from the Introduction to Sociology class she had said she was taking at the

university were making their way into their conversation.

Mammy Nyangaa swayed by, checking on her guests. Probably also counting the bottles on the tables before heading out for a few errands.

* * *

"Let me share one more story," said Britney, "about Luc and Nadia, and then I have to rush for an appointment with someone leaving for Muzunguland, to take a parcel to Providence."

Britney asked for a few minutes to write a quick note to go with the parcel for Providence: 'Providence, Sweet Heart, here is a little something for you, mostly ingredients for your cooking, and the embroidered shirt and kontri bag you asked for. I decided to put some of the money you sent through Muzungu Union into business. I buy and sell second-hand clothes – shirts, trousers, blouses, skirts, underwear and socks – to students and to customers at Mountain View Hotel. Just don't want to waste the money. If there is any profit I will be happy, if none, then I would have at least occupied myself than use the money for unimportant things. I started it a week before I got this job with Lilly Loveless (funny name), a nice Muzunguland girl working on – you won't believe it – Mbomas and Girls. I'm having fun telling her stories. As I told you, my mother and our lovely Pasky were sick and I sent her Mim\$300,000 to go to the hospital. I asked her to call me today, but she has not called yet. I am sure you can imagine how much I want to see your charming smile again and kiss you long and hard. The thought of it excites me already and I feel like ... (ha ha). (Remember your parting words to me: 'You are a beautiful girl Britney, and a lot of men would like to disturb you, be very careful'. So many people are boring me – more on this by email or when you call). I have so much to tell you. I keep dreaming about you advising me on certain issues, especially against doing the wrong thing with men. I will tell you more. I miss you so much you cannot imagine my dear, and I just wish you would hold me in your hands once more and tell me all will be fine in your usual way... Your loving wife, Britney.' She folded the note with care, inserted it in an envelope and sealed, after turning down Lilly Loveless' request to know what she had written. "Curiosity kills the cat," said she, with a playful smile.

* * *

Back to the story, Britney said, "Luc and Nadia were happily married for ten years. A good tree is known by its fruits, so they say. Even though they had no children, this was never an issue in their relationship. They both worked but Nadia went the extra mile to keep the family comfortable by doing business. She travelled to Muzunguland and elsewhere quite often for business, a sort of buyam-sellam international. As the eldest child of her family she had a big responsibility to bring up her younger siblings. They both had younger members of their families living with them. Quite often Nadia had small misunderstandings with Luc's sisters, especially when Luc's mother came to visit. Despite the misunderstandings, Luc was still himself and never ever sided with his sisters or mother. Quite often he comforted Nadia and reassured her of his love.

"Sounds like a nice guy," noted Lilly Loveless.

"They were both Christians and God-fearing," Britney continued.

"The issue of a child was always discarded by Luc when Nadia felt unhappy or uncomfortable. Luc quite often comforted her by saying a child was God's gift and if it does not come, this should not create a problem in their lives. Even to Nadia's friends Luc would tell them to assure Nadia that a child is not the most important thing. Their lives could still be happy without children. This reassured Nadia who could for no reason think or ever believe Luc was not honest. He had never been unfaithful and was always loving and caring. From work he always came back home for the family to eat together after which they rested. He was not a drinking type so he spent very little time out of his home and most often when he went out, it was for sports. Even on Sundays when it was common for Mimbo men to declare: 'We send our wives and children to church to pray for us, while we go to the bars with our friends,' Luc was most likely to be found in church and thereafter at home playing Ludo or Scrabble with Nadia, and generally feeling good in the company of the woman he loved best."

"All is smooth sailing," Lilly Loveless interjected. "Let's hope it stays that way."

"On the surface, yes, but badness has a way of playing games with goodness in this world of ours," said Britney. "This, perhaps, might explain why Nadia, in her subconscious, remained uncertain, as she would dream weird dreams in which she would tell a perfect stranger such impossible things as, 'I don't love you enough to marry you, but I need you to get me pregnant.'"

"A clear sign her problem had become psychological."

Britney nodded. "Luc sustained an injury in the course of doing sports one morning. This became so serious that he had to be transferred out of his station to see a specialist. He had to undergo an operation which was successful. He soon returned from hospital but could not do any strenuous sports. The pain persisted, thus he was now a convalescent and had to go constantly for check-ups. He was eventually transferred to be near his doctor to cut down on travel expenses."

"I see the rain clouds gathering on the horizon," said Lilly Loveless.

Britney looked up, and realizing that Lilly Loveless was speaking metaphorically, continued. "Nadia and the rest of the family could not move with Luc immediately since she needed her own transfer, and the rest of the family had to wait for the end of the academic year. So Luc moved out to his new station to take up office and to make the necessary arrangements for his family to join him. It had to take some six months before all this could be arranged and within this time he paid regular visits to his family."

"Luc's transfer took him closer to the rest of his extended family who took care of him while Nadia was away. This brought Luc to the greatest confusion in his life. He started having very funny ideas but since they were strange to him he had an inner conflict and felt sad or miserable. He was now not constant with his visits to Nadia. He tried to send excuses and other persons with the excuse of much work. Nadia could never disbelieve him so she took them for genuine. She decided to visit Luc, but Luc turned it down since he had not found a house and was living with a sister and her husband who were influencing him a lot."

"I sniff trouble," said Lilly Loveless.

"The sister was married to a divorcee who had no child by his first

marriage but she had already had a child of her own. She was much regarded as a queen by her husband and his family. Her husband was one of the big shots in society, and this gave her an influential position now in her own family since she had the economic power to lord over them. Nadia then stayed on and did not visit, but once things were through and Luc got a house he then went off and brought Nadia. It was quite an instant decision because he did not give Nadia much time to inform her friends."

"It seems more like he was hoping she wouldn't accept the invitation," speculated Lilly Loveless.

"When they finally settled, Nadia was fast to notice certain new attitudes in Luc. He visited his sister regularly but the sister and her husband hardly returned the visits. Luc's youngest sister who had spent many years with them went off on holidays to her sister and did not come back. Nadia was a bit startled by this, and when she asked Luc why the little girl had not come back Luc's reply was, 'she is more comfortable out there.' Nadia then decided to go herself and find out, but to her greatest dismay, she was received horribly. Her sister in-law told her off. This bothered her a lot but when she told Luc, he said the sister was just teasing her, and that Nadia should not give heed to what the sister said. Nadia and Luc maintained their relationship but somewhere there was a problem which did not come into light."

Boisterous roars came suddenly from a nearby table. Britney and Lilly Loveless glanced over to see Mama Nyangaa arm wrestling with one of the big-bellied beer drinkers. She was putting her whole self into it, at least judging from her behind, and her opponent was breaking out in sweat. As an office worker who sat on the same spot all day and whose only form of exercise was lifting his beer mug, he was no match for Mama Nyangaa, who spends hours a day doing manual labour like pounding corn or yam into fufu. When she finally brought his arm to the table, uproarious yelling and applause filled the eating place as she sauntered back to the kitchen. Mama Nyangaa seemed to have a place in more than one heart there. She had a round of free drinks sent to the table of her opponent, who would certainly drink off defeat with his buddies. All of it seemed to be investment in her business. She even had a round of drinks sent to the table of Lilly Loveless and Britney, they were to discover later the gesture was more of a motherly act than the business decision they thought, knowing their habits and pocketbooks.

"So, where were we?" asked Lilly Loveless when things calmed down and went back to rippling conversations.

"Nadia was trying to figure out why Luc's younger sister was being so distant," Britney reminded her.

Lilly Loveless pressed record and Britney continued. "Finally, Luc could not contain things any longer so he decided to talk them over with Nadia. He came up with the story of a child he had while in training and this child's mother had kept away the information from him. Nadia asked why and how that matter should feature now. Luc narrated a lengthy story which ended up in that the child threatened the mother that she wanted the father, and the mother was forced to reveal the story to the child. The mother then contacted some of his friends who told the sister. His family now wanted him to take the child."

"Hmmm...", sighed Lilly Loveless, "that might lessen her concern about being childless, but it would certainly introduce other issues, wouldn't it?"

"Well, Nadia vehemently refused to hear of it," explained Britney. "The child could never enter her house. She did not even believe the story. If Luc had this child before their marriage and he was certain of the child, he would have, even without knowing much of the child, hinted to Nadia that he had made a girlfriend pregnant while in training. This would have raised no doubts now. Nadia and Luc had already been processing papers for adoption, and with this recent trend of events, Luc refused to sign the final document to get the child. He would rather have his that he knew of. Nadia's friends tried to persuade her to at least receive the child and try to find out details, but she was adamant. Luc too had his shock when he invited the child finally and the child said she could only come with the mother."

"Hmmm...", sighed Lilly Loveless again, "not a simple case. Back home where I come from, the trend these days is to move towards a concept of parenthood as a legal responsibility, and not simply as a biological relationship."

"That's the idea behind adoption, I agree. But pushed too far, it throws the biological baby out with the bathwater, don't you think?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

"The risk of transforming the whole notion of a family," said Britney. "If biology is not the bedrock of social parenthood, then why should anyone take marriage and living together in a family seriously?"

"I see it, rather, as a very exciting prospect," countered Lilly Loveless. "As I don't believe in this whole idea of a child flourishing best only when it has a biological mother and father or parents of opposite sex. I'm yet to be convinced that a child suffers when both of its parents are the same sex. Nor am I persuaded that a mother is necessary for a child's wellbeing. I would even go as far as to suggest the abolition of marriage altogether, or at the very least, the imposition of marriage expiry dates for those who absolutely insist on getting married. In that way, a marriage contract is renewed only if the marriage works and divorce is instant, speedy, painless, and at minimal expense in case of failure..."

"That's too radical for me," said Britney. "You know what my position on this matter is, given that we've been up this road before. I maintain that strong families are at the heart of strong societies, be this in Mimboland or Muzunguland. You cannot abolish a social practice that hasn't come full cycle. Remember the discussion we had at my place?"

Lilly Loveless nodded.

"I can't say that marriage is a panacea, but there is some security and satisfaction in knowing that I am a wife and a mother, however poor we may be as a family. It is what I call paying our debts to society," reiterated Britney.

"I remember your position, clearly," said Lilly Loveless.

"Chapter closed," said Britney.

"I rest my case," echoed Lilly Loveless.

"As you can see," continued Britney, "Nadia's woes increased daily. She was constantly in trouble with Luc's family. And, unlike in the beginning, Luc had come full circle. He supported his family all the way. Their relationship deteriorated daily and the rift between them increased daily. Luc

spent days and nights out of the home under the pretext of work. The change was so drastic that Nadia could not believe Luc anymore. He came back home tired and complained of pains. Some months went by with no sexual relationship between them. This was not normal for the sex glutton that she knew Luc to be.

"Nadia began investigation and got stories of where Luc was seen most of the time. When she confronted Luc with these stories, he simply told her not to make herself unhappy finding out and following him around. Nadia could not use their car anymore. Luc was in control and parked the car kilometres away, where the daughter lived with her mother. Nadia's spies came and gave her all the information she needed – where the car was usually parked, when, where he went and with whom, etc.

"Nadia decided one evening to see for herself. She went to where the car was parked, saw it but did not have the courage to go to the house. She stood around the car until when Luc came out about to leave. She started off towards home. When Luc entered his car and took off, he somehow recognised Nadia and stopped. He asked her where she was coming from so late and she lied that she had gone to see off a friend who lived this way. She got in and silently they drove home. Nobody talked to the other for two days. On the third day, Luc told Nadia, 'You want to see for yourself, you'll get hurt in the end.'

"Nadia and her relatives then decided to go all out for a fight. Her relatives went to the mother of Luc's daughter and warned her to stop intruding in someone's home and threatened to do something terrible to her if she continued. The woman recounted to Luc that night what happened. He came home much earlier than usual and told Nadia if anything happened to Isabelle, as the woman was called, she would be held responsible. He then dropped the bomb, telling Nadia he thought their relationship had come to an end and that he didn't think he could really be happy with her again. He asked Nadia to pack and leave his home."

"Just like that?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"You know things had been brewing for awhile," replied Britney. "As it turned out," she continued, "Nadia instead asked him to pack, leave and meet Isabelle, saying she wouldn't move. Luc told Nadia how he had been tolerant for all the years, how she was not caring, and how she had many faults which had never been mentioned. Luc continued to use the car with Isabelle, sometimes driving past without stopping while Nadia waited for a taxi, in certain cases under the rain.

"Must have been difficult for her," commented Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, she felt wounded," continued Britney. "Nadia had thought about damaging the car since she contributed greatly for it to be bought, but her friend pleaded with her to remain calm and not do anything that would bring her shame in the end.

"So Isabelle became Luc's idol, and Luc's family members paid her regular visits. Luc became the main provider and made life comfortable for Isabelle.

"But what goes around comes around," said Britney and looked around to make sure no one was paying attention to them before she continued.

"Luc gets the shock of his life when he goes to visit, and finds Isabelle

in the bedroom with her clothes off with Nadia who is also naked."

At this, Lilly Loveless slammed her Mimbo-Wanda to the table in shock and the blue in her eyes seemed to stream out.

"What to do?" asked Britney. "Nadia got back at Luc in her way and Luc can't go back to Nadia because she has now moved on. We don't know where he is living now or how he is getting by."

"Amazing tale," was all Lilly Loveless could say.

"I've overstayed," said Britney suddenly as she collected her purse, "and I'm going to be late, so let me run if you don't mind. I'll leave you here with Mammy Nyangaa to finish your beer. Anything you need, you let her know." said Britney winked and then gave Lilly Loveless a hurried and noisy smack of a kiss on the cheek.

Lilly Loveless sat speechless and thought, "Baby, one more time," as she watched Britney turn on her heels and head out of Mammy Nyangaa's.

* * *

It took Lilly Loveless several days to persuade Adapepe to talk to her about pornography amongst students. Many of the stories collected by Britney clearly hinted at the possibility that the consumption of pornography was widespread. Also, she had taken encouragement from Adapepe's immediate association of her name with Deep Throat, a classic in the realm of sexually explicit films. There was a private reason as well, which she dared share with no one for fear of compromising her fieldwork. This was the fact that she stripped and lap danced for men in exclusive clubs back home in Bruhlville, and was curious to know whether Africa, in terms of sexual freedoms, was indeed as much of an exception as was often claimed. Her background, personal experiences and quest for intimate knowledge of practices and experiences elsewhere were the real reason behind her scholarly fascination with sex, power and consumerism in Africa, and choice of Mimboland – Africa in miniature, as her case study.

At first Adapepe was reluctant, claiming her centrality to the strike did not permit her to take even an hour off. But when Lilly Loveless offered to contribute money towards meals for the leadership of the strike and also to commission Adapepe's boyfriend, Burning Spear, to collect and transcribe lyrics of popular Mimbo music relevant to her research, Adapepe agreed to speak. This was on condition that Britney did not come along, for Adapepe, despite her carefree attitude, didn't want anything she told Lilly Loveless to become the talk around campus. She knew only too well that Britney was not called "weaver bird" for nothing. So they met without Britney, at Mammy Nyangaa, because Adapepe wanted to stay close to the centre of action, and the fact that her cell phone was ringing every now and again demonstrated her claim to be at the heart of things.

"Since watching Deep Throat, pornography fascinates me," said Adapepe. "Not in a positive way. Of course not, but rather, in the odd and very unrealistic things they do."

"Such as...?" Lilly Loveless eyed her with curiosity.

"Women wear high heels to bed. Men can keep going on and on and on, as if they were some super men or the Oliver Twists of sex, when we know that ordinary men are in and out even before you've unzipped your skirt."

"What else?"

"The sort of things they say. For example, 'if you've been a boobs or arse man all your life, we are here to broaden your horizons.'"

"What else? Tell me everything," Lilly Loveless pressed, bubbling with thirst to know.

"You really are interested, aren't you?" asked Adapepe, pulling out a sheet of paper from the pocket of her tight-fitting jeans trousers.

"What's that?" Lilly Loveless opened her eyes widely.

"It's a list of the sort of things they say in porn," replied Adapepe. "Something told me you might ask questions of this nature, so I took the precaution of writing them out for you."

Adapepe handed the list to Lilly Loveless, who returned it to Adapepe to read out to her, saying that an aspect of her research was to determine the extent to which those she interviewed were comfortable with what they shared with her as practices and experiences.

With nonchalance, Adapepe read out her list. "Some examples of phrases contained in the pornography I have watched are: 'If you've been a boobs or arse man all your life, we are here to broaden your horizons'; 'She is such a f**king giver'; 'I want to hear you come for me'; 'I like it when you lick my belly button'; 'F**k her with that big cock'; 'I like it deep in my throat'; 'Why should I cheat myself of a couple of more inches?'; 'You really got to love the cock, suck the cock'; 'You like to see my tongue buried in your arse'; 'You want to f**k my face'; 'Do the damn thing'; 'Spank him, he likes it'; 'Let it loose, don't hold back'; 'I wanna hear you come'; 'I like to make guys come'; 'I'm gonna make your pussy come with my pussy'; 'I love to be f**ked any way, I don't care just f**k me'; 'What do you wanna see me do with her?'; 'You thrill me when you drill me'; 'A woman's pussy has as much personality as her face'; 'Guys, you should know that all women like to be dirty little whores, etc.'" When she finished reading, she turned to Lilly Loveless, a mocking look on her face, and asked, "Satisfied?"

"Most impressive," remarked Lilly Loveless, appreciating the fact that Adapepe, unlike Britney who could not bring herself to repeat the favourite turn on gimmicks of her friend of cybersex, did not at all feel uncomfortable proclaiming that she watched porn, and documented its language and practices.

"In their penetration game, men stick and thrust their way wherever there's a hole, and women suck and lick gleefully. They make one wonder whatever became of the maxim 'cleanliness is next to godliness'," Adapepe added a personal reflection.

"You seem to be very familiar with pornography and its language... what is your degree in?"

"In Gender Sociology, we have a course on film and gender stereotypes," said Adapepe.

"I thought so," said Lilly Loveless. "Your knowledge of these things is more than that of a mere consumer."

"Thanks."

"Anything else?"

"Ugly-looking, wildly tattooed men love humiliating women by masturbating all over them, knowing fully well that no one believes that the women are enjoying it the way they pretend to the camera that they are."

"What makes you think they pretend?"

"How can you take seriously a woman who smiles with appreciation when a man splashes her face with semen, describing it as a teaspoonful of salty mainly harmless fluid, like oysters?"

"I see what you mean," said Lilly Loveless, not bothering to add that she was allergic to oysters. "Don't forget that porn-stars and film-stars are paid to entertain and must be seen to do just that."

"Isn't love-making too serious a thing to pretend about?"

"Don't we all pretend? How often do you give the impression of enjoying what a man is doing when what you'd rather do is tell him off as a selfish, greedy, masturbating bastard?"

"You are right," Adapepe agreed, "but we must admit that pornography carries such pretence too far. The most ridiculous is the way the woman moans noisily and continuously when an enlarged penis is inserted in her mouth, or while the man is thrusting as if out to humiliate her more than to give or harvest pleasure."

"What else?"

"Porn women give the impression that orgasms are that easy to come by and that having one at the same time as a man is a usual occurrence, which, as you and I know, isn't true."

Lilly Loveless agreed.

"I don't know if you've noticed the current proliferation of pornography. When we were growing up, pornography was rare. Even rummaging through the cupboard where our parents stored their precious possessions was unlikely to spring any surprises. I remember how strictly enforced the 'forbidden to under 18 years' rule was for erotic films at cinemas in Zintgraffstown, where I grew up. We adhered strictly to the harmless Bollywood menus that were imposed on us by the gendarmes of taste in those days."

Lilly Loveless nodded in agreement. "I was struck to see how openly pornographic videos and DVDs are displayed on pavements and by hawkers. I've even come across videos by local girls and boys involved in pornography of their own. Is there no policing of what is done or consumed?"

"Pornography is addictive. Everyone is going for it, the police and men of God included, so who would police whom?"

"Isn't that worrying?" asked Lilly Loveless, less personally concerned with morality than she sounded.

"It depends where you are coming from," explained Adapepe. "The young, girls and flying-shirts alike, see in pornography an opportunity to learn things their parents are too scared to teach them. When the connections are good and we can surf the Internet, we can feed off as many pictures of naked women and men as we like, and with a little money we can buy videos and DVDs or watch satellite television with round the clock channels that deliver pornography right into our bedrooms and sex parties. For Mbomas going out with university girls like me, pornography offers opportunities to experiment and explore fantasies they dare not broach with their wives, who in turn seek flying-shirts to explore the fulfilment their husbands are too busy elsewhere to avail them. For those who are not married and who don't have girlfriends, pornography assists with masturbation in the same way that champagne does to the self-esteem of a lonely rich man. Everyone finds

satisfaction in pornography, regardless of what they may say or not say in public."

"So nobody is interested in controlling it?"

"There's much rhetoric about morality, but the action is very thin, which is where we measure what people really mean."

"And the state...?"

"For us, we say, a fish starts rotting from the head."

"Which means?"

"If those on top shine the light, those at the bottom will see what direction to go."

"That's profound, but what has it got to do with porn?"

"Simple. If those who should be controlling pornography are all keen on being served their double penetration, blow jobs and anal sex like three course meals, even those of us who eat at Mammy Nyangaa would want to emulate them."

"Do men and women consume pornography in equal measure?"

"I personally believe it is a men's thing," said Adapepe. "Men take great pleasure out of looking at an attractive female, whereas women do not gain any significant reward from looking at pictures of men, perhaps because the handsome ones are few and far between."

If Adapepe's explanation is true, Lilly Loveless thought, it would explain why back in her native Muzunguland, the Playboy magazine sells better than its Playgirl counterpart.

"Do you think there's a danger of men who watch pornography losing the ability to relate to women in real life?"

"Not a chance," said Adapepe. "Not the Mimboland men I know. Real women are real women, and pornography can never replace the real thing. I have a man I see when I like, how I like, where I like and for what I like. When he is looking for ways to corner me like game, he uses various tactics, pornography included. But when it comes to making real love, I can see in his eyes that his love of porn absolutely never stands in the way of his love for me."

"Is it Burning Spear you are talking of?"

"Yes, Burning Spear, the DJ of my heart..."

Adapepe's phone rang. "Sorry I must go," she stood up. "Things are heating up again out there. My comrades want me. La lotta continua!"

"Thanks for your time," said Lilly Loveless, shaking hands with Adapepe. She gave her the money for food she promised Adapepe and her fellow leaders of the strike. "Do give me a call when you are free to continue our conversation on this and related issue."

"I will," Adapepe said and ran off.

Lilly Loveless chose her best underwear to go with her new dress, and left the house in a hurry. She was late for her appointment with Britney. As she made her way to the main road to take a taxi, Lilly Loveless passed a group of bricklayers and carpenters working on a storey building nearby rumoured to belong to Dr Simba Spineless, the Reg. Whistling and comments on her body parts trailed her like a swarm of bees. She could almost feel them staring, grabbing, pinching and slapping her on the bum. She felt like a gazelle hounded by a pack of hyenas. Although the men were quite disrespectful, she wondered what they would do if she decided to strip for them. Would they be dazzled? Go completely randy? Pretend to have everything under control as did some of her stiff upper lip clients back home in Muzunguland? Or would they find it such a bizarre thing to do in broad daylight? She ignored them and took the first taxi that came along.

"You look fabulous in your new blue dress," said Britney as Lilly Loveless got into the back seat of the taxi beside her. She had been waiting for Lilly Loveless at the agreed intersection on the outskirts of Puttkamerstown. They headed for Munyinge-Fish, a little coastal fishing village just behind Mount Mimbo, reputed for magnetizing fishermen from communities as far afield as the distant countries along the West-African coast.

"With that impressive open back and scarf draped elegantly around you," said Britney, "I don't know whether to say you look like a blond beauty or a blue devil." They both laughed, and the taxi driver looked at them in his rear-view mirror with squinting eyes. The dress was styled after the one Britney had worn when Lilly Loveless invited her to her place for the birthday surprise.

Britney had brought their picnic lunch and Lilly Loveless Mim-Wata in her soft blue collapsible cooler. Leaving their footprints in the sand of the shore was their priority of priorities. Only after that did they proceed to the village, where they settled at a hut with a covered patio that seemed to be a small eating place and looked around to see if anyone was working there that day or not.

Not seeing anyone, they settled at a table nonetheless, both of them looking out toward the shore. They took off their sandals, stretched their legs out under the table and put their feet up on the plastic chairs in front of them. They commented on the colourful slender fishing boats with fanciful names gliding through the water and gracing the skyline and on Mount Mimbo overlooking and meeting the sea.

Lilly Loveless unpacked her recorder, and Britney unfolded the stories she had collected, one after the other.

"First, let me start with an aperitif."

"That's new. What do you mean?"

"A story to wake your appetite," Britney explained.

"OK, I'm ready for your aperitif," Lilly Loveless passed her tongue over her lips.

* * *

"A university assistant lecturer was having an affair with his student

last semester. One day he went to her place where they made love all afternoon and into the early hours of the night. Exhausted, they fell asleep and woke up late. He hurriedly dressed and went to a nearby bar where he gulped two bottles of beer in a hurry, then rushed home. 'Where have you been?' his wife demanded to know. 'I can't lie to you Sweetheart,' said he. 'I'm having an affair with a student, and I came from her place where we had sex all afternoon and all evening.' She sniffed his breathe and said: 'Nyamfuka! You lying bastard! You've been out drinking with your useless friends again!'"

"With such an aperitif, I can't wait for the meal," said Lilly Loveless.

"The assistant lecturer, who was very good at lying, unfortunately lost his job early this semester when the university authorities discovered that he had bribed, crooked, and wriggled his way through the civil service hierarchies until he was the third most well-paid civil servant in the country, after President Longstay and the Prime Minister Fabulous-Nobody. He now awaits the verdict of the heavy hammer of the state disciplinary apparatus, and is said to shiver with fear like a rain-beaten day-old chick, as years in prison are a real prospect. When we say Mimboland is a bastion of corruption, it is not always at the top that one should look."

"I hope his wife is sticking by him," said Lilly Loveless. "Don't they say behind every crumbling man is a supportive woman?"

"That's funny. Unfortunately both his wife and girlfriend refuse to crumble with him. While the girlfriend has since moved on, the wife is not very enthusiastic to stand by a husband who did everything to deprive her of the fruits of their marriage."

"Where is he today? Could I interview him?"

"He wouldn't talk to you if you tried. He is one of those students and colleagues laughed out without mercy. They called him 'Half Book', as he is yet to complete the PhD on 'The Anatomy of Corruption in Mimboland' he started ten years ago."

"Sounds like a man best avoided," said Lilly Loveless.

Britney agreed and continued with her next story.

* * *

"Bonny and Angèle," Britney began, "were at university together. Bonny was two years ahead and when he finished and got a job, Angèle was doing her last year. By the time Angèle was through she got pregnant and gave birth to his child, a baby girl. Angèle soon got a job also but not in the same station as he. Bonny proposed marriage and despite the odds, they finally got married. They both couldn't have been happy but for Bonny's widowed mother who thought his first obligation was to her. He was the only eye among the blind and so had to take on all of the family responsibilities. His sisters had all dropped out of school due to pregnancies and thus had children whose fathers they couldn't even tell."

"Bonny has his house and hands full, doesn't he?" said Lilly Loveless, to show she was paying attention. She didn't want Britney to accuse her of leaving her words at the table to contemplate the scenery.

This encouraged Britney and she continued. "The problem is that Bonny all along was a playboy in a sense and Angèle had refused to accept this with the hope that he might tire of that life and settle down. Poor Angèle!"

After their marriage, Bonny's mother told Angèle that her dream had been for Bonny to marry a girl from his home village, meaning a girl from the mother's village since Bonny's late father was from another village."

"When the mother-in-law is not on your side, I sense trouble," said Lilly Loveless, drawing on some of the other stories Britney had already shared with her.

"Angèle did not take this seriously and simply laughed it off. She moved to live with Bonny and his mother. From day one it was two wives living under one roof and not a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law."

"There's gonna be trouble," predicted Lilly Loveless.

"Easy to see it coming when you're on the outside," said Britney and continued. "Mama wanted to dictate the terms on which things should move and how the house should be run. Bonny would once in a while step in but told Angèle to manage. He couldn't send his mother away."

"Angèle was from a well brought up home and an independent family thus got lots of consolation from her family who even gave her extra income. She got pregnant again and almost lost her life with the pregnancy. She had an emergency operation but lost the baby."

"That's too bad," said Lilly Loveless.

"It was particularly painful. The ultra sound scan had already revealed the sex of the child was male, which she hoped would draw her husband and his family closer."

"Old traditions die hard," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"They were both transferred," continued Britney, "and while at their new station Bonny had an affair with an adolescent and got her pregnant. The girl's mom is said to have been worried about the girl when she told a friend: 'I notice how condoms seem to disappear from the bedside cupboard. At first I thought my husband was the culprit, until I realized it was my 16-year-old daughter who would sneak them away one by one every so often.' The condoms she probably used with her teenage boyfriend, but when she saw Bonny, they waved farewell to condoms, and the result was her pregnancy. Angèle had no idea of this but Bonny's mother knew, and when the little girl had the baby her family took her away but kept in constant communication with Bonny."

"Angèle lost two other pregnancies and finally got a baby boy who came as an answer to her prayers. Because her first was a girl and born out of wedlock, and she kept losing children, she worried she might not bear a successor for Bonny. She had even seriously considered taking up the advice of a friend to visit a traditional medicine man but was discouraged when the man insisted he would have to sleep with her for seven consecutive nights for his medicine to be effective. Mama was already out of patience with her for not given her son a 'chop chair'. It was therefore a most welcome development when she had the boy."

"A boy at long last!" shouted Lilly Loveless. "I hope they lived peacefully ever after."

"Mama was never ever comfortable with Angèle or her family members when they visited. She found fault always and her son believed her when she brought problems up. Mama told Angèle she was extravagant, not caring and full of herself because she came from a wealthy family. Mama decided with Bonny to go and get the little boy, Eddy, since the mother was

to get married soon and the family would want the issue of Eddy settled. Mama and Bonny secretly went off to negotiate for Eddy, but the boy's aunts and grandparents refused to discuss anything without Bonny's wife present. On their return they did not know how to tell Angèle. But as Angèle had to be informed, Mama started being nice to Angèle and after some weeks brought Angèle and Bonny together and brought up the story. Angèle went with them and brought Eddy to his new home. Eddy and the others grew up together as a real family."

"Seems like that was well negotiated, no? What next?" interrupted Lilly Loveless.

"Bonny was transferred," explained Britney, "and he had already built a home for Mama so he could not let Mama go with them.

"Good for him," commented Lilly Loveless.

"They went off and had a really happy family life until they were again transferred back to an area close to his mother. Bonny's first transfer was a good idea because he felt it would give him time to try to prepare a home for himself and his family. But with the transfer back, there would be only hell and misery. The first few months were spent with Mama but he was like a complete stranger to his house. Mama and her daughters all teamed up against Bonny's family but for Eddy whom they said was their own. They put into Eddy's head ideas about Angèle not being his mother.

"Real troublemakers, no?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"I guess you could say that," said Britney, "because Bonny quickly moved out to a rented home but it was already too late. Angèle had taken her own decision and was quite unconcerned with Bonny's family. Angèle had really been doing everything for Mama and her children and grandchildren but since they saw Bonny as their lord they never recognised Angèle.

"Their lord and master seemed to have a hard time coping," Lilly Loveless couldn't help but note.

"Everything is up to Mama," said Britney. "Mama could find one reason or the other to visit and stay. It was on one of her visits that her real self came out. She addressed Angèle as occupying her son's home and eating all his money. She said how Angèle had filled the house with chairs and couldn't make children. She was going to get a girl for Bonny who would give him children."

"They already have three and they need more? Do they have land that needs cultivating?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"That's beside the point," said Britney. "Mama went ahead and got a girl to whom Bonny never even said good morning. Mama took that to mean that it was because the girl was not as qualified as Angèle.

"Angèle gritted her teeth and took all this, and all the while Bonny continued in his normal playboy life despite the advancement in age."

"He's in his own world, isn't he?" mused Lilly Loveless, now getting into the story and forgetting about the horizon spreading before her and the mountain rising behind. "What happens next?"

"Well," said Britney, "Mama resorted to black magic which still did not yield any fruit. Bonny realised it and stopped visiting his mother. Angèle had long decided with her children never to go there. This meant that Mama no longer had enough to eat so she started sending Angèle messages that she had neglected her. None of her messages were replied."

"I can almost hear doors closing on Mama," said Lilly Loveless.

"When Mama realised she could not bear it any longer," explained Britney, "she feigned illness and took off to see Bonny and Angèle.

"Angèle had always taken her to hospital whenever she came to them sick, but this time, it did not occur to her that Mama was there because she was indeed sick. Angèle went about her normal activities and retired to her room to sleep. Mama could not stand it, she called Angèle to talk things over with her but to Angèle it was too late. No repairs could be made."

Lilly Loveless sighed as Britney concluded the story. She wanted to know more. Not about Bonny because he was the incessant playboy who fled instead of facing his problems and she knew what he would be up to. Did the dictator of a Mama live? How did Angèle continue to manage? What about the children? But she wouldn't ask such questions because she knew Britney had gathered as much information as she could. And she wouldn't ask Britney if she would have visited Mama in the hospital if she were Angèle because she would say it's difficult to hypothesise about such things if you're not actually in the situation yourself.

So she took two bottles of Mim-Wata out of her cooler bag, offered one to Britney and asked her who they would hear of next.

* * *

"Bernard and Agatha," said Britney without hesitating. "They are married with six children and are quite elderly. Agatha has never been faithful. There are even incidences when Agatha's daughters complained of sharing boyfriends with her. She is a real sweet mama – what we sometimes call Mbomese, who can be so foolishly insanely in love, especially when she meets the right young man to melt her heart with his hesitant, venturesome hands of innocence."

"Really?!" asked Lilly Loveless.

"I can still say things to surprise you?" asked Britney. "What may surprise you more is that Bernard, quite calm and gentle, knows this weakness of Agatha and for this reason, their grown up children have always worked away from Agatha.

"When he worked, Bernard usually came home on weekends but had this peculiar attitude of sending home his weekend box before his arrival. When asked by his friends he said he had to notify Agatha he was around to avoid any embarrassments.

"Agatha could run around but had Edward as a steady partner who funded all trips and expenses. Edward was polygamous with many children but cared very little for his family. He would yield to any demands from Agatha but would not for any of his wives or children.

"It was on one of their weekend spree that they got involved in a car accident and Edward was badly injured while Agatha had just a few bruises."

"Not good," said Lilly Loveless.

"Not good at all," agreed Britney. "Agatha managed to get Edward to hospital but could not inform his family. She all the same tried to inform Edward's son-in-law but did not give the cause for his being in hospital. Edward's family was then informed. His second wife was illiterate but was quite an imposing woman. She had once caused a row regarding Edward and Agatha but was silenced by Edward. She now went to hospital and before

long the whole story was out. Agatha prepared food well spiced the next day and took it to hospital, but before she could enter the ward she was attacked and her clothes torn off her. She managed to escape back home, half naked, dripping of okro soup and smeared with the garri she had prepared for Edward."

"What happened next?"

"Edward recovered, their relationship continued."

"Really? Wonders will never end, as they say around here," said Lilly Loveless, suddenly having the feeling of gradually turning native. Anthropologists would say this was the time to leave the field in order never to lose sight of the fact that she was there 'to study the natives, not to become one of them.'

"Yes, but Edward was picked up for embezzlement. He couldn't have had the lifestyle he had purely on the strength of his own wallet and sweat," Britney pronounced. "But as they say, 'man weh yi chop big chop yi mus shit big shit'."

Lilly Loveless didn't ask for an interpretation, which meant she had become quite comfortable with pidgin.

"While in detention, Agatha visited him and took food to him, this time without incident. The wives were arrogant whenever they met Agatha. They took nothing to him for one simple reason: Agatha helped him spend the money so she should take responsibility to help him out. Agatha did help him out and Edward was released in time to destroy the files that had led to accusations of embezzlement against him."

Amazing country with amazing people, Lilly Loveless thought, with reference to all the amazing stories of people doing amazing things. She remembered what Prince Anointed told him, how highly placed officials were used to burning important official documents to destroy evidence of corruption.

"The affair with Agatha came to a halt."

"Just like that?"

"Agatha left 'to seek pastures new and embark upon fresh challenges', which was widely interpreted by those who knew her to mean that she had found an exciting new flying-shirt."

Again, Lilly Loveless, curious though she was, wouldn't ask Britney about Bernard or the children or just what Agatha was after because she knew Britney told all she knew. But Britney saw the question marks in the eyes of Lilly Loveless and smiled saying, "Someone called me a black hole the other day."

"Really, why?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"She said all I hear disappears into some unknown place."

Both laughed heartily at that observation, but Lilly Loveless, given what she now knew of Britney from talking to Adapepe, thought rather of a broadcasting weaver bird than a black hole.

Britney spread a cloth on the table and started unpacking their lunch.

Two fishing boats had come in - 'Christ is King' and 'Jealousy Kills'. Lilly Loveless and Britney ate fried plantains and grilled fish and watched the fishermen and the women who funded the outing, dance the boats up the shore. Putting their weight on the bow would send the back of the boat into the air. They would then turn the boat, with the bow against the sand, so it

was parallel to the shore, move to surround the back of the boat and count one-two-three. When they heaved their weight down, the front of the boat rose into the air and they rotated the boat once again and let it rest on the sand, with the bow pointing up the shore. This was repeated four or five more times, and the boat moved up the beach farther from the water each time.

Lilly Loveless felt lucky to witness this graceful dance that required such cooperation and was a daily routine for people in the fishing community. When she asked Britney about it, she was told, "Such beauty is a detail, considering all other worries."

"So," Lilly Loveless said, "let's hear some more worries."

Britney pressed record on the recorder between them and proceeded with her next story.

* * *

"Nicholas is a businessman in Sawang and Joe is an electrician living in Sakersbeach. These two gentlemen bachelors have a force that has often brought them to Puttkamerstown and that is the irresistible wild beauty of 'Nina the Beautiful', as her friends love to call her.

"Nina comes from a royal family - which means many wives and tens of children competing for the attention of one man playing the role of husband, father and chief. I cannot really say she is wealthy but with the help of two talented gentlemen like Joe and Nicholas, she survives, and so does her beauty. Nina is not only beautiful, she is gentle, calm, polite, and has a musical voice. Nobody could have imagined she was capable of organising a coup."

Britney noticed Lilly Loveless lift her head from her notebook in anticipation. "A coup?" she asked.

"Be patient," said Britney, "I'll get there. Nina had been dating Nicholas steadily," she continued recounting, "for two good years when her mother decided to enrol her in the best professional hotel management school in Puttkamerstown. That is when she met Joe, an ex-student of the same school. From the beginning, she was never interested in him and never even accepted Joe's invitation to go out for a drink or to a nightclub or even to go visiting places. Nina has never been strictly for the wallet, although she always considers her potential boyfriend's occupation before deciding whether or not to take them seriously.

"As far as Joe was concerned, he had met his ideal woman and nothing was going to turn him away. After all, he imagined that he was handsome and could earn an income, so why should 'this little princess' be so uncompromising. It was only when he discovered that he was spending more of his evenings in Puttkamerstown than he did in Sakersbeach that Joe knew he had given his whole heart to Nina.

"So one evening he invited Nina out and she accepted because she was used to him by then. He poured out all his troubles to her and even cried openly. He asked Nina to advise him on what to do because he had neglected his friends in Sakersbeach since he spent most of his time in Puttkamerstown just to catch a glimpse of her.

"Nina was confused but told him she already had her fiancé and they were about to get married in a few months. He promised Nina he would play

cool and never interfere in her affair with her fiancé.

"Finally, Nina accepted, for she was interested in a relationship that could lead to marriage, and there was no guarantee that Nicholas could offer that. This lovesick gentleman just might offer where others had failed.

"The day Nina accepted to go out with Joe, problems started. Nina and Joe had just come out of a snack bar and were strolling along the road preparing to get a taxi when Nicholas came out of a taxi in front of the snack bar they had just left. A lady came out with him and he held her round the waist as they entered the snack bar. They never saw Nina.

"Nina stood shocked, she could not believe it. As for Joe, he was confused and thought he had hurt her but she denied having been hurt. Nina went home that day totally depressed. Worst of all when she discovered Nicholas had not even come to look for her and he did not until one week later.

"When Nina went to school the next day, her friend Evelyn chatted fondly with her saying that she knew Nina was 'fine' because she saw her boyfriend yesterday buying roasted fish in front of a snack bar, thus she imagined Nina must be inside. Nina just smiled. From this revelation she accepted within her that truly she had seen Nicholas with another girl.

"She never asked Nicholas why he had behaved like that and who the other girl was, but she was to know of this girl when their school organised an end of year party and she decided to invite Nicholas as well as Joe.

"Her strategy was that, since she was highly involved with the organising committee, she would not have enough time to be with either of the boys. So she thought neither would understand that she had a special relationship with the other.

"While she was planning this strategy, Nicholas was also planning how to participate at this occasion with her and with his other girlfriend and love, Martha, a student at a government high school.

"Sounds complicated," said Lilly Loveless.

"Don't know how they keep it all straight," added Britney and continued. "Nina had informed Nicholas that she wouldn't be able to spend a good evening with him because she was a member of the organising committee. Thus Nicholas took this as an opportunity to come along with Martha and his junior brother Charles, who was living in Sawang with him.

"So on the day of the party, Nicholas, Martha, Charles, Joe and Nina were attending a grand party at the ballroom of Nina's school. By this time, Joe had totally won Nina's heart and was thus honoured as a special invitee entitled to a place at the high table. Nicholas was pleased not to be raised to the high table, for this would have disturbed him from enjoying the occasion with Martha who had no idea that Nicholas had another girlfriend in the hall.

"Trouble started when chewables, cake cutting and introductions had been done with and everyone was drinking and dancing. This is when Nicholas started relegating Martha to his junior brother and going for Nina but his junior brother had already fallen for another girl in the hall and didn't want anything to disturb him from proposing to the girl."

Lilly Loveless wondered how Britney kept all this straight without a diagram or at least notes.

"The last straw came when the DJ played a nice slow song and every man who took to the dance floor had his girlfriend with him. Nina having

told Joe that her fiancé was present, Joe decided to enjoy the occasion in his own way.

"Nina went out of the hall and as she entered again, she discovered that Nicholas was with the girl she had seen him with some two weeks ago. So when the second slow was played, Nina went straight for Joe and while they were dancing, Charles went to Florence his newly found love. Nicholas was forced to dance again with Martha who had insisted for so long.

"The pattern continued just like this and by the end of the occasion Nicholas was drunk and threatening to beat Nina. When Martha came up to him to ask who Nina was, he slapped her and she lost control and fell to the ground. Nina understood that Martha did not know that Nicholas was her boyfriend. So she invited her out of the hall, told her the story and left the party immediately with Joe. That was the end of her relationship with Nicholas, who lost Martha and Nina at the same time as Charles got a new girlfriend and Joe was made to feel secure."

"That's it?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"That's it," said Britney.

"Having made it through all that juggling alive, do you think things will stabilize a bit for Nina and Joe?"

Britney just smiled because she knew Lilly Loveless knew she would not respond to such hypothetical questions, even if she would allow herself to ask such a question once in a great while.

* * *

Lilly Loveless and Britney were startled to hear something and turned to see an old woman pulling a plastic chair up to the end of their table.

"I'm Ruby and this is my place," she said, "but you girls were so settled and engrossed and seemed to be taking such good care of yourselves that I didn't want to disturb you, not even to propose you grilled barracuda."

Britney and Lilly Loveless took a look at the colourful newcomer to the table. Her wiry white hair was attached at each side of her head with yellow bands. When she smiled, which seemed to be a lot, judging by the patterns of the wrinkles on her face, you could see that her triangular teeth were brown at the bases. Only one was obviously missing. She looked different from the women they had just seen taking the various varieties of fish out of the boats. Black plastic frame glasses with perfectly round lenses rested on her crinkly nose. The flower print fabric of her dress was bright orange, green, yellow, red, white and black. Its wide shoulder straps buttoned in front exposed a bony neck and skinny arms. She wore small multi-coloured beads around her neck and from her ears.

"You girls sure do a lot of talking about family and relationships and love and such things," said she, "not to mention a bit of infidelity here and there."

Lilly Loveless and Britney looked at each other, realizing they had finally caught up with a pretty good eavesdropper.

"Well," continued the woman, "let me add my story to your basket."

Lilly Loveless pressed record, just in case.

* * *

"My husband was a diplomat. We lived in Muzunguland for eight

years. We were hot and I know you girls know what I mean. We'd be at the dinner table and he'd make a good joke in front of friends, and I'd say, 'That's a good one, dear, you'll get your dessert tonight,' and everyone would laugh. Eventually things cooled down on that front as they often do."

Britney's eyes grew big. Lilly Loveless set her pen to work.

"I took care of our four children and everything else having to do with the home and family matters. This I did so much so that I started feeling like a statue in the house, an African statue, a working African statue, and not the type the Muzungus buy at the market to take back home. My husband treated me like an object, completely out of tune with what was going on inside me."

She inspired pity, but her dignity was unaffected.

"When we moved back here to Mimboland, I decided things had to change. I had the support of my mother and family. I went back to my job at the ministry of things foreign. I started writing books for children. I started travelling. My husband seemed to realize all of a sudden that I wasn't as dormant as he had always perceived me. I was boiling with energy and on the verge of eruption. He didn't know what to think or say or do. So he said nothing and did nothing. He just watched.

"You see Mount Mimbo over there? As you know, she has erupted twice recently, just after the deaths of two prominent village chiefs. I felt like something had died in me and that something else was coming alive like the lava that flowed down and disappeared right into to the sea when she belched."

Britney could feel the children's writer that the lady said she was.

"He didn't know how to embrace the new energy within me. He seemed stuck and afraid. I was ready to understand and experience new mysteries of life. I tried to invite him to evolve with me but didn't know how to reach him. Used to stability, he felt suddenly confronted with danger of the unknown.

"I wish we had learned to move together, but he hung back, and I had to sojourn alone. Though we are always surrounded by others and embedded in community, we are also in some ways and some times alone on the fishing boat of life."

Lilly Loveless loved the analogy, and stole a look at the colourful boats at the shore. The first buyers had vanished, and a new group had come to await the arrival of the next set of boats.

"They say that the southwest side of the mountain is one of the wettest places in the world. When I think of that, I think of you two girls and everything I've heard you talking about. So wet and fertile you don't know just what will grow there tomorrow. So be careful and go wisely."

"What finally happened with your husband?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"He died last year and I opened this small eating place to make myself useful," she concluded. "And I hope you girls will feel free to come by anytime. I'd like to grill you up some tilapia, Ruby style."

Lilly Loveless and Britney gave and got big hugs from Ruby on the way back to the road. Some three hundred metres away, they spotted a lovely elevation by the shore and yielded to the temptation to sit for a little longer and watch the beauty of the comings and goings of the waves, of fishing boats, and of seekers after fish

"I've just remembered another funny story by the tailor," said Britney, once they were on their own again.

Lilly Loveless listened.

"He told me about this couple who had two beautiful daughters, but who have always wanted a son. Two years ago they decided to try one more time for a son. The wife got pregnant and delivered a healthy baby boy. The excited father was the first to rush to the hospital to see his new born son. He was horrified at how ugly the child was. With a face like the skin of the stomach of a goat, the child was the ugliest he had ever seen. He turned to his wife, a worried expression on his face, and said: 'There's no way I can be the father of this baby. Look at the two beautiful daughters I fathered! Have you been fooling around behind my back?' The wife smiled sweetly and replied: 'Not this time!'"

"Excellent!" Lilly Loveless exploded in laughter.

"Now, if I may, do you by any chance have stories of your own to share?"

"Funny stories?"

"Similar stories, funny or not..."

"OK, two quick ones," said Lilly Loveless, wetting her lips with her tongue.

"There was this wedding where I come from. The groom was nearly 100 years old and the bride was in her early twenties. The groom looked as if he would not survive the wedding night, because his bride was a healthy, vivacious, determined young woman. The next morning, the bride came down the staircase slowly, step by step, hanging onto the banister for dear life. She finally managed to get to the reception of the hotel. The receptionist looked really concerned and said: 'Whatever happened to you, honey? You look like you've been wrestling a crocodile!' The bride groaned, hung onto the counter and managed to speak, 'Ohhh God! He told me he'd been saving up for 80 years and I thought he meant his money!'"

When she recovered from laughing, Britney said, "We've got similar stories here, of men who appear less than what they can do until they are fed the pleasures of younger flesh. We call them 'slow water runs deep,' 'small no bi sick' or 'pepper na pepper.'"

"Ready for the second?"

"Absolutely, and even for a third."

"A judge asked a woman after a man was found dead in her room: 'Lady, you were the last to see this man, tell us what happened to him.' She said: 'He started to roll his eyes. I thought he was coming, but he was gone.'"

"I should listen to your jokes a lot more," said Britney. "You take something, you leave something, no?"

"Good research is give and take," Lilly Loveless agreed. "And this one is for the road, as we say in Muzunguland. A beautiful Hollywood starlet married a very short ugly man, and when her best friend asked why she had decided to marry a man so obviously short and ugly, she replied: 'He is tall on his wallet.'"

"Tall on his wallet indeed," echoed Britney. "What would the world be without the wallet?"

"Is that a question?"

"What do you think?"

"Aren't you the one who told me of the saying that God feeds the blind snake?"

"That's because God has got an infinite wallet, and the blind snake isn't aware of how abundantly endowed the world around it is," Britney laughed.

There was silence, a long silence, before Britney came up with yet another story.

"Lilly, are you listening? I still have one more story for today."

"Of course, Britney, I'm always ready to listen to you," said Lilly Loveless distractedly, "especially because of the richness of the data you bring me."

Britney switched on the recorder, though not entirely convinced that Lilly Loveless' heart was in her words. At least the recorder will be listening, she thought, but was reassured when Lilly Loveless perked up at the click of the recorder and picked up her pen expectantly.

* * *

"I can't tell you how I got the story," Britney began, "but there was this couple at the university. They both worked there. They had wanted to get divorced ever since they married. But they stayed together for 20 years. And these were not happy years, starting and ending as they did, with quarrels and the headaches of living together despite yourselves. They had four children and then moved to Muzunguland where he taught African Studies, while she raised their children the Muzungu way. Many a time, their problems were compounded by cultural conflicts. There was for example, the fact that as parents they were not allowed to discipline their children with corporal punishment. In other instances, it was the man who felt cheated of not being able to discipline his wife the way he would ordinarily be able to do back here in Africa, without the police sticking its head through the door to ask silly questions. The wife, in addition to taking care of the children, also had to work in a boutique, selling beautiful imported handicrafts, just to enhance the family income. All the same, she developed a solid clientele, and with the taste that Africans have for higher education, even found the time and resources to do her PhD in education."

"I admire her resolve and resilience," said Lilly Loveless.

"Meanwhile, her husband went out with one woman after another. She was resentful. But she could not change him. She put up with him and his affairs. He even used the fact that his wife was doing a PhD to boost him, to draw other women to him. She was a source of pride to him. He claimed to read literature and write poetry, yet she said, 'He doesn't understand the human spirit and certainly not his, nor mine.' She said she could write poems more intense by magnitudes than his.

"She came to realize that some people just have a limited capacity to love and an overwhelming desire to screw up. And he was one of those. He continued to seek love in others and to wrap himself in a multitude of relationships in the hope of finding the love he lacked. Lovely feeling may blanket and keep you warm for a while, but it eventually turns cold, if not underpinned by real love. So when that happened, he would go hunting again. Unquenchable but sterile hunger was the name of his essence. Love on the surface, with nothing to draw it really close, nothing to take it deep,

nothing solid on which to grow really strong."

Lilly Loveless saw that Britney was using notes to help her remember certain parts of the story.

"You could see pots rubbing up against each other but no real sharing, blending or merging. No growing together, just rubbing. And with too much rubbing up against each other, two pots could break each other. In a way she pitied him, his cyclic searching, never coming face to face with the real him in him, never knowing what he really sought. Was he always incapable of love? Or had something happened to drain him of love? I suppose you have to have been loved to love..."

Lilly Loveless looked up from her notebook trying to decipher Britney, to know if she was still telling the woman's story or adding her own interrogations.

"Finally she left him. Of course he accused her of the worst things. And all that hurt her. She received a letter in which he had put it all on paper. She cried for weeks. Can you believe she was ready even to go back to him, after all he had done? And this admission boosted him. He bragged about it, that his wife was going to come back to him. He still saw her as an acquisition. He used her submission to draw women to him. She realized, at long last, she couldn't go down this road anymore. He had pulled her down to a point she could bear no more. She was at the edge of taking her life.

"She called him, and released words that had been in her heart for years. She told him he was not the kind of man she could love or make love with. She told him how his heart had hardened, and how the light in his eyes had gone.

"And with the words voiced, she felt better and lighter in her heart. She has since moved back here to Puttkamerstown with their two youngest children, a son and a daughter. She stays in daily contact with the two others who are abroad. Their father doesn't seem to have even the love of a perfect stranger for them. But what do you expect of someone incapable of love in any form? Her son is right when he told me that there are all kinds of people in the world and we have to accept them and that there are those who love little, play a lot and inspire pain beyond measure. And one of those could be an uncle or a nephew, even a husband, a father, son or daughter. You can't afford love only for those who deserve to be loved, can you? The world would be too ugly a place to look at, I swear."

Britney clicked the recorder off, and Lilly Loveless closed her notebook and put her pen down.

That was enough for the day.

They took a taxi back to Puttkamerstown, where they separated. It was Friday afternoon, and Lilly Loveless was keen to call Bobinga Iroko to find out what his plans were for the weekend.

The motor park was bustling as usual with drivers calling for passengers, boys selling airtime, and women vending all sorts of foodstuff including pineapples, avocado, oranges and sugar cane. Britney and Lilly Loveless negotiated their way through and sat on two high stools at a stand where they could get drinks and observe the goings on, after buying an assortment of fruits. Lilly Loveless added a special microphone to her recorder hoping it would pick up Britney's voice and not the background symphony of purposeful cacophony by screaming humans and revving engines.

To test the microphone, Lilly Loveless pressed record and told Britney, "You know you are my right hand woman."

"Does that mean you are my left hand man?" replied Britney.

They both laughed. But inside, Britney felt tense. She was dying to ask Lilly Loveless where she had been all weekend. Britney had tried and failed to reach her by cell phone and, afraid something might have happened to her, had taken a taxi to her place Sunday afternoon. She had banged and banged on the door and concluded that only a sleep of death could account for Lilly Loveless not hearing the banging. She had either gone out or was up to something inside, she had thought as she left Desire's place where Lilly Loveless stayed. Her worries refused to subside, to the point where she dreamt of confronting Lilly Loveless when she eventually caught up with her:

'Have you abandoned me?' she asked Lilly Loveless in the dream.

'How can that be? Abandon you? Not even in my most conclusive moments of madness could a thought like that cross my mind.'

'Are you mad sometimes then?'

'Aren't we all?'

'No,' said Britney. 'My state of mind does not allow me to be mad or to know about being mad without actually being mad.'

'There is more to life than dialectics... did you know that?'

'I am now getting very mad...'

Unable to resist the urge to know the truth any longer, Britney gave words to her curiosity, "I missed you last weekend. Where did you disappear to?"

"What do you mean?" replied Lilly Loveless, not looking up. "I was in throughout," she added, fiddling with the microphone.

"Really?" Britney tried hard to disguise her skepticism.

"Yes. All you needed to do was come by."

"I see," said Britney. She wondered if it was Bobinga Iroko or if Lilly Loveless had met someone else to keep her busy all weekend. She felt wounded but tried not to show it. Masking her face with a smile, she turned her attention to the call of the moment.

* * *

Satisfied with the playback, Britney began, making an effort to sound loud and normal, "Mrs James is a lady with three children. She married James, a businessman in Pawa-Town, purely for cash. The age difference is 28, and they've been married for eight years. Mrs James, who hates to be

associated with the bush, knows very little about her home village. She tells herself that to keep winning in this day and age, she must keep running away from everything traditional. And the fact that her husband is well to do is an added incentive. It all started when at the age of three, she was told the worst insult anyone could heap on another was to call them 'villager'. She bleaches like mad, because she grew up in a context where only fair skinned women were visible to the eyes of men.

"James decided to open a cosmetic store for his wife after six years of performing her role as a housewife. However, apart from ensuring her personal appetite for cosmetics, Mrs James revealed more academic ambitions than in running a store. So her husband decided she could enrol in the university here in Puttkamerstown.

"She's been reading social sciences for two years now and the most interesting part is when she goes on research or fieldwork every weekend that she does not go to Pawa-Town. Most often the husband comes stumbling in search of her, just to find a note for him that she has gone on an excursion."

"What kind of social science fieldwork excursions?" asked Lilly Loveless. "Drilling expeditions?" she joked.

"Her husband had the same sort of question in his head," responded Britney. "So one afternoon the husband created a sensation when he inquired from the whole mini-cité if these research fieldworks really existed. He was told that they did and that each department has its own way of organising them. Some do so during the week, while others with heavy programmes do so during weekends. Mrs James was saved by this favourable reply because she's very friendly with everybody, and her door is open to anybody who feels hungry, which includes hunger for cosmetics.

"Meanwhile Mrs James goes on her field trips to visit her young boyfriend who has grown rich overnight from the sale of petrol illegally imported from the neighbouring Kuti Republic."

"But," interrupted Lilly Loveless, "you said Mrs James married Mr James for cash. He opened a cosmetic shop for her. He even agreed to put her through university. So what is she lacking that makes her have a boyfriend?"

"She's looking now for a little excitement down the generational ladder," explained Britney, "someone to appreciate her nice fair complexion, to value it the way she wants to be valued. She wants someone to take her to paradise and shower her with basic pleasures. Dannyboy, the boyfriend, has two taxis and has resigned from his initial business to sell at a boutique he recently opened. Mrs James goes out with Dannyboy only in the night when they can sit and drink together mostly at odd places, where Mrs James cannot be identified by her husband's friends whom he has instructed to spy on her round the clock.

"Sometimes they go to Sawang to do some shopping, sightseeing and also to relax, especially when Mrs James complains she's depressed."

"I see," said Lilly Loveless.

"Dannyboy scarcely comes to Mrs James' apartment except on invitation. He knows what risk he is taking and sometimes he declines such an invitation, when he feels danger lurking in the wings. Mrs James is four years older than Dannyboy, and, according to what she says, she would like to divorce Mr James and marry him, if only she had the willpower."

"Just like that?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"I guess, after satisfying her cash flow appetite, she grew weary of her old man of a husband," said Britney. "Or perhaps the husband is threatening to retire to their home village."

"Husbands get traded in so easily?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"I met Dannyboy by chance," said Britney, "when I visited his boutique to buy a chain which I never bought because it was too expensive. Mrs James met me there, bought a bottle of Fanta for me and we chatted for a while. Then she rushed back to her apartment because she was expecting her husband. In her absence, Dannyboy wondered how I knew Mrs James. I told him she stays near my mini-cité and we studied together, especially during the exams.

"Dannyboy told me a story about Mrs James. He said that she had lied to him that she had one child and that she was not married but was keeping a fiancé whose parents had approved of her as their son's wife. Thus it was left for her parents to confirm the relationship, for the contract to be signed.

"He also said Mrs James was very money-minded and a born flirt. That he had caught her twice with different men whom she later said were her husband's business associates. He wondered what she was doing with such persons in a hotel bar at night."

"She was into broad fieldwork there," noted Lilly Loveless.

"Whatever the case he said he wanted to save his neck by dropping Mrs James because the whole town was already aware of the fact that he is going out with someone's wife.

"What's funny is that once he threatens to end the relationship, she also threatens him with this knowledge. Dannyboy finally left his boutique in the care of his brother and disappeared from sight. The brother claimed he went to the village to carry out some traditional rites because he is his father's successor.

"The truth is that Dannyboy's parents advised him to transfer to Sakersbeach. He couldn't transfer his boutique but he certainly transferred himself. He is now like an armchair entrepreneur managing the business by phone from afar but intends to come back to Puttkamerstown when the affair dies down."

"Mr James started finding his wife at home on weekends. He must have wondered whatever became of research fieldwork," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Just before the first semester of this university year ended, Mrs James was reliably informed that Dannyboy lived in Sakersbeach. Her informant said that she knew the street and area but not the particular home in which Dannyboy was living. And so she described it to Mrs James who took off for Sakersbeach the following day. When Mrs James knocked at the first door to inquire if a certain Dannyboy was staying around, Dannyboy himself opened the door and then they stood shocked, staring at each other."

"I sense fireworks," said Lilly Loveless.

"Dannyboy invited her in and brought her something to drink. And then explained to her how he was just from the village and wanted to open another boutique in Sakersbeach so that his brother could manage one. That's why he had transferred to Sakersbeach. He further said that Mrs James had lied to him that she had only a child and was not married. He had risked his

life enough because of her. Thus, enough was enough."

"That was pretty frank speaking," commented Lilly Loveless.

"That led to blows," said Britney. "Mrs James stood up as if to go, then opened a good fight at Dannyboy's house that only ended because of assistance from neighbours. She left Dannyboy's home with a swollen eye, a fractured leg and a headache. When she reached her mini-cité, she summoned every neighbour around and told them that when her husband comes, they should say that a certain girl they don't know came and attacked her in her room then ran away.

"She then went to Mount Rebecca Hospital to consult, after which she phoned her husband and told him the framed lie.

"Mr James was in Puttkamerstown the next day, but Mrs James only told him that the girl had come to her room twice to sell some earrings and dresses, which she carries around selling. Some girls in the mini-cité accepted that they saw her once but nobody could identify her or her name.

"Mr James advised his wife to change her apartment, but she refused saying she had gotten so used to having her friends around. Moreover, they often helped her in her bookwork.

"Even after the fighting and the telling off, Mrs James refused to give up on Dannyboy. She kept going to Sakersbeach and terrorizing him and all those who came to see him, until one day an idea struck him from nowhere. He invited her to his place and announced: 'What I did was a test, to see if you really love me. Now that I am convinced you do, I have decided to marry you, give up everything in the city and take you with me back to my home village where I have acquired a huge plot of farmland. There we can farm for subsistence and for sale, and live peacefully and happily for the rest of our lives.'"

"What did she say?" asked Lilly Loveless. "I bet she jumped at the offer."

"She stormed out of the place as if attached by a swarm of killer bees, never to be seen or heard again."

"Amazing," said Lilly Loveless. "It must have been something he said."

"I think it was the fact that he mentioned the words 'village' and 'farming', which were like mentioning the crucifix to Dracula."

"Hmmm," uttered Lilly Loveless, "do you think Mrs James came out any wiser or that she'll soon replace Dannyboy? What about her three children? And her studies? No family around to advise her? How did you advise her since you're friends, sort of?"

* * *

Britney smiled at the litany of questions and said, "Let me tell you about Barbie and the letters from Denis in Nyamandem, a flying-shirt fast making his way to becoming a Mboma. One Sunday morning as I left church and was returning to my room, I met Barbie, a classmate of mine, and a conservative feminist."

"Conservative feminist?" said Lilly Loveless.

"Conservative because I asked her once what she thought about the changing role of the woman and she said that women may have two hundred thousand changing roles but the fact is that they will ever remain subordinate

to men. Not only because of men, but because the woman is her own worst enemy. 'Women complain about men test-driving women, but see how we fight one another to position ourselves to be test-driven. Married women think that single women are their enemies, while older women are convinced that their problem is the younger women,' she explained. 'The same is true of housekeeping,' she added, 'where for a woman to graduate to become a madam, she must trample upon the dignity of a fellow woman by reducing her to a maid.' As a student of Women's Studies she had come to the conclusion that 'feminists and gender experts in Africa are, like rottweilers, more interested in frightening others into subservience than in developing theories and encouraging practices that mean much in real life.'"

"Wow. That's potent stuff," said Lilly Loveless, writing frantically.

"So on that Sunday morning Barbie said she had decided to visit me because something was up. She gave me three letters to go through. The first was a letter from her boyfriend working in Nyamandem and the others were letters from him to two other girlfriends at UM."

"Really?" said Lilly Loveless, "How'd she come by them?"

"I asked Barbie the same thing. She said the sender did not advise the person who carried the letters on how to distribute them. So the person gave hers and begged her to distribute the other two because he was travelling the next day out of Puttkamerstown."

"I hope she didn't do what I am thinking - open the mails of the other girls?" Lilly Loveless anticipated.

"Barbie knew one of the girls whose letter she had with her so she begged me to accompany her to the girl's house. We met Cynthia in her room. She gave us food and we ate. Obviously she had no idea that Barbie was also going out with her boyfriend. She read the letter silently and asked Barbie if she knew anyone going to Nyamandem so that she could reply. Barbie said she had no idea because the letter was given to her along the way by a student. She asked Cynthia if she knew the girl who owned the other letter but she didn't. So we left her and she thanked us for bringing the letter."

"Barbie played it cool," said Lilly Loveless.

"Exactly. It was interesting to me that during this visit she behaved so well that no one could have even imagined that she was boiling with anger like the belly of Mount Mimbo.

"After two days Barbie told me that someone directed her to Lucy's room, and she went and gave her the third letter. Lucy was so happy when she read the letter and asked her if she knew of Denis, her boyfriend. Barbie said she didn't know much about him but they had met once at an occasion in Nyamandem. They discussed other matters and then she left her but this time Barbie told me that from the way the girl behaved she believed she had an idea that she was also dating Denis.

"When I asked Barbie what she was going to do, she told me she had already replied to Denis' letter and had told him that when he visits Puttkamerstown he should go and stay either with Cynthia or Lucy because she will not accept being among his harem.

"I had never met Denis and had no idea that Smith, my next door neighbour was a friend of Denis. Flying-shirts, whatever their differences, tend to stick together when it comes to girls, and often tell one another this: 'In our lives girls may come and go, but true friendship stays for ever.' This is

especially the case for those of them who attended the same secondary or high school."

"That's interesting," commented Lilly Loveless. "It basically boils down to: we shall do with girls as we please, but must never let them do with us as they like."

"Something like that," agreed Britney. "When Barbie came to my room and went to chat with Smith, I often believed it was because they were reading the same subjects at the university. The day Denis reached Puttkamerstown, I knew he wanted to beat Barbie because I heard someone threatening and talking aloud in Smith's room. Then I knew it was him when Smith told him that he should lower his tone because his neighbour is Barbie's friend. By then I had no idea that Barbie had already made the other girls understand that there were more than four girls who claimed Denis was their boyfriend."

"When I went to Barbie's room and asked her to take off, she accepted because as she explained, Cynthia, Lucy and herself already knew what was going on, and Denis was more beast than man when he was angry. Barbie told me that she was sure Denis had gone to Cynthia and Lucy, and had been rejected and also told the story. So Denis was conscious of the part she had played and was certainly going to hunt for her."

"Barbie disappeared from her room for four days. She gave me one of her keys and each day I went there to ventilate the room, I met threatening notes deposited by Denis."

"On the third day Smith inquired from me about Barbie's whereabouts. I told him Barbie had gone for the weekend and I had no idea when she would come back because she went right to Nyamandem. He told me Denis was Barbie's boyfriend from Nyamandem and as I had Barbie's key I could give it to him. I refused, claiming that anybody could as well come to me as Barbie's boyfriend. From then on they started suspecting me and when Denis looked at me, it seemed as though he was going to strangle me."

"So you wanted to make them understand that if boys can stick together, girls can stick together even better?"

"Yes, if we really want to," said Britney. "On the fourth day, I saw Denis off alongside Smith. Denis claimed he was returning to Nyamandem because he was already late for work. I had no idea that Smith and Denis had decided that he should change his residence so that maybe if Barbie was around, she would come out."

"When I returned, I rushed to where Barbie was hiding and told her Denis was gone. As she was going to her room, I went to mine, took my siesta, got up and took a bath. Until I reached Barbie's door, I didn't know that I was to bathe twice that afternoon. When I climbed on Barbie's veranda, I saw Denis' shoes near the door. He had certainly removed them because of the carpet. As I went behind the house I met Barbie's neighbour coming out of the common toilet. I asked her about Barbie and she said she was not back. So I knew at once that Denis had no idea who had opened Barbie's door."

"I was so tensed. I went to relieve myself in the bath. Then I saw Barbie's towel. I called her and she let me in. She had no idea Denis was waiting for her in her room. So I gave her my shoes which were too small for her but she managed to wear them, my face cap and my blouse. She took someone's skirt from the lane and left for her hiding place again. I was left

with my shorts, a towel I wrapped round me, and slightly oversized bathing slippers. So I took the soap dish, the bucket and having washed my legs, arms and face, I dashed out of the bath. I left the bathing items outside but for the towel and was singing one of Tracy Chapman's songs when I suddenly stopped, pretending to be surprised seeing someone's shoes at the door. As I entered the house, someone lunged for me but stiffened when he discovered he had made a mistake."

"It must have been some sort of comfort to find that people like Denis make mistakes," remarked Lilly Loveless.

"Absolutely," Britney agreed. "Later Denis explained everything to me and lied that someone had told him that Barbie had just been dropped off by a taxi and so he decided to call round again. He assured me he was never going to harm Barbie but I knew him too well to accept his assurance. Denis finally left for Nyamandem very disappointed."

"That's what you mean when you say, 'united we stand divided we fall'," said Lilly Loveless, proud to remember a popular Mimboland adage.

"Smith has never known of the plan and Barbie is staying with a friend now. Come next semester she is going to change her room. Denis has lost Lucy and Cynthia as well. To date, he keeps threatening Barbie. And that's all I know about the situation," said Britney to pre-empt any questions from Lilly Loveless. "But Barbie is clearly onto something with her approach to Women's Studies, and I wish her well. In a way, she reminds me of Adapepe."

"Britney," said Lilly Loveless, preparing nonetheless to ask a question, "With all of this going on around you and with your evening work and with this work you're doing for me, how do you find time for your studies?"

"Remember," she replied, "my boyfriend is in Muzunguland and that helps. Moreover, where there's a will there's a way. Isn't that what you say?"

Lilly Loveless laughed, her mind going back to Martin, who had corrupted the saying to 'where there's a willie there's a way', in those days in their relationship when such jokes used to make her find him funny. He was a charming bartender in those days - which he combined with his studies at the University of Bruhlville, and in no time, had served his way to her heart with his lovely, well-balanced mixtures of Bloody Marys and Angel's Kisses, of which she was often drunk.

* * *

"I have another story about another university friend and it also involves letters."

"OK," said Lilly Loveless, "let's get on with it." Britney waved for the pineapple seller who, after a short while, returned with two halves of well-cleaned pineapples carefully wrapped in plastic paper. Lilly Loveless was impressed with the efforts at cleanliness by the seller. Eating the pineapple gave them a foretaste of the fruits they bought earlier to take home.

"Sophie is a friend of mine, right here at the University of Mimbo, so more than a classmate to me. Her husband, Stephen, works in Nyamandem as a secret agent who hires himself out to those who want secrets investigated."

"I hope he doesn't start practicing his professional skills on his own wife," Lilly Loveless anticipated, as she was used to doing.

"Sophie's relationship with him has really deteriorated. All of a sudden, her husband with whom she has had three children does not want to see anything good about her anymore.

"He claims he has been spying on his wife, and is determined to teach her and her 'rotten' family a big lesson."

"He calls her family rotten? Isn't that too harsh?"

"I can't believe the sort of letters he writes to her. A few days ago she shared one with me in which he accuses my friend of deceit, the quest for wealth and the good life. He insinuates, perhaps to frighten her out of her wits, that my friend has infected him with HIV, because of the promiscuous lifestyle she has developed."

"Maybe he gets ideas from his work as a private investigator," conjectured Lilly Loveless.

"The letter is very threatening," continued Britney. "He accuses her of prostitution, of having in her the gene to harlot and to pretend. 'You are and have always been an ashawo international,' he bleats, even though he is known to dangle his manhood like a bell in front of every woman who crosses his path. And proceeds to catalogue all those he believes she has had or is having an affair with. The list is long and ridiculous. He accuses her of relationships with lecturers in order to obtain what he dramatically refers to as 'sexually transmitted marks.' She flirts with taxi men, sleeps with classmates, is hungry for everything in trousers, and keeps running around men of substance for money in exchange for sex. Yet the money never seems enough. For all these years, 'you have exploited me under the pretext of marriage.' He adds: 'How sure am I that the children you claim are mine are in fact mine? When I look into their eyes, there is nothing in them that smiles daddy.'

"He even writes that Sophie is a disgrace to her mother and her father and to Mimboland. 'You disgrace the Darlin' Jehovah you pretend to worship morning and evening seven days a week.' He singles her father out for praise: 'He is a humble, nice and God fearing man not aware of all the bad things you do with your mother's blessings. Your bad luck started when you sold our wedding gifts for cash and looked at my best man with unforgivable yearning in your eyes.'

"He brands Sophie dull, claims his brain to be far too much for her, and ridicules her efforts to make him feel inferior by insinuating he reasons like a goat. 'Who has goat brains? Me who has found out all your dirty secrets or you who allow worthless men to use you like toilet paper? Your self-esteem has vanished and you have forgotten that when a lioness carries herself as a she-goat, a he-goat will woo her.' Only a brainless girl like her, he continues, would trust the very people who are leaking information about her. 'Wickedness is what you have in abundance, not brains. I am not the least jealous of you Sophie and will never be. I just pity you because you have derailed. You are living in a dream world.'

"To be honest with you, I don't believe a word of all the insults he lumped on my friend.

"And there's no doubt he is still in love. Sophie showed me a letter he forged and sent someone he believed she's having an affair with. I copied out the letter: 'Dear Polycarp,' he wrote, impersonating Sophie. 'Forget about everything we have had in common since we knew ourselves. At the age of 53

one can judge the type of person you are. All you know is sex, sex, sex. Do you think that is what we eat? You went as far as boasting how you adore sexing me at the balcony, in a boat in Sakersbeach, in the tea plantation, in Mountain Valley, everywhere, from behind like a dog and in toilets. I am afraid you are sub-human, you are an ape, you are evil and diabolic and everything around you is satanic. Just leave me alone with my husband. Thomas and I are legally married and nobody will separate us. Forget about everything that has happened between us. End of story, no regrets.'

"Sophie can't stand the guy anymore. He is not the Thomas she married."

"He does sound paranoid," said Lilly Loveless, still admiring how Britney got any intellectual work done with all she described happening around her. "I hope her life is safe with him."

"Why shouldn't she be?" Britney forbade the thought. "Sophie is a smart girl, and God loves her. Nothing evil shall come her way."

The vendor asked if they wanted another drink, hinting that if not, they might want to turn their stools over to some paying customers. "I'm after cash, girls, and not chatty beauties. I can't eat beauty or words now, can I?"

"Just a minute more," negotiated Britney with a nod of her head and a big smile, satisfied with the pineapple she had just eaten. "I have a surprise," she said to Lilly Loveless. "I collected some love letters for you."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless expectantly.

"They were faxed to my friend's 14-year-old daughter Lizzy, from a young boy in Kutim. She couldn't care less about him and so readily surrendered the letters to me." Britney withdrew them from her purse and handed them to Lilly Loveless. "I have an exam on Monday where I take some computer skills classes, so I have to go study," said Britney. "You can look over the letters whenever you get a moment. I don't need them back, the same way the girl didn't need them."

She was about to leave when Lilly Loveless insisted on going along. "I'll read the faxes in the taxi and we could continue chatting till where you are going, then I'll leave you to study in peace and proceed to the Archives or something."

"OK then," said Britney.

The vendor served drinks to two men who had already taken their places at the counter.

* * *

Once in the taxi, Lilly Loveless read the letters:

'Lizzy, I've chosen you; oh I don't know when it happened. Perhaps in the swimming pool, when we sat face to face and eye to eye, I had a flash in my head. It was the first time I ever had it. I didn't know what happened to me, Now think, I'm sure, as my mother is mine, loving you began to put my heart in a high voltage like a nuclear station. Don't you love a guy with nuclear power?

'Lizzy, Girl, when I first saw you it was love at first sight. We've been going out now for about six months, six days, six hours, six minutes and six seconds by my Rolex, and I still feel the same. You're my queen, and this love is true, every sunset makes me think of you. You are the sun in my life. By the

way, why do we say the sun is rising instead of saying that this part of the earth is turning to meet the sun? I'll never forget what you mean to me because I love you. Coming straight from the heart of Fabrice.

'Lizzy, I know I haven't said it much before. Well, it's because, see, I get all choked up inside. It just doesn't wanna come out. I don't know. So no matter what happens, always remember... (You know the end!) Oh! This love is becoming an obsession (4 and 3/4 times in a day I think about you). In fact don't forget to go to Pizza Hut this afternoon. I thought I've got an idea. Come with me to the Burger King, after, we'll go to the movies. I'll buy your ticket and also pay your Hotdog. See you and more this afternoon, Fabrice. Call me after 11 o'clock in the morning.'

Lilly Loveless noted that the last fax did not come through as clearly as the others:

'Lizzy, Je t'envoie ce gentil fax pour te dire... You know I think to myself what would life be que je pars prématurément à Muzunguland. Without you baby. On all the good times that we... D'autre part je pensais aussi au RV du ... I can't picture myself without you Baby. BMW, ma mère est bien d'accord. You gotta lovehold. You gotta a lovehold that's ... De plus, après avoir discuté au BURGER on ... So strong I need you to carry on ... aurait peut être pu arriver chez toi. Au fait, si ... I love you. I like you more than the word... I wanna be your favourite innerwear. Tu veux que je te ramène quel film que ce soit Love (horreur, policier, Action, Comédie?!) fais moi signe ce matin. J'aurais aimé t'écrire certaines phrases, mais je pense à tes soeurs qui pourraient lire ce fax, Then this is the problem. De la part d'un copain qui cherche le diamant de ton cœur avec la torche. There is something about your lovin I can't understand everything you do keeps me lovin you. There's no way that I could ever try to breakaway. Fabrice.'

* * *

"You mentioned 'sexually transmitted marks' a while ago, how common is that as a phenomenon at the University of Mimbo?" asked Lilly Loveless, through with reading Fabrice's inflated letters.

"It is very common, especially between male lecturers and female students. There are some girls who use their good looks to charm everything around campus, including success at exams. They are known as 'the survival of the prettiest club'. I remember how one once tried to recruit me with the words: 'It baffles me to even imagine that a pretty girl like you would waste your time reading for an exam.'"

"How sad," said Lilly Loveless.

"But there are lecturers as well, who force themselves onto you regardless of what you feel or want. If a lecturer admires you and you don't have any feelings for him, and make this known, you are in deep trouble," said Britney.

"In what way?"

"In every way. The lecturer, even if he is in a junior position, has the power of life and death over the student. If he hates her, he can give the student the lowest mark in class, even when she has written the most brilliant essay. And if he likes her, he can make her the best student in his course even when she is the dullest. That's the power of the male lecturer. It is the power of the mark, not that of the wallet or of good looks."

"And the university administration allows things like that?" Lilly Loveless couldn't believe her ears.

"What are they to do?" retorted Britney. "You want the administration to mark in place of the lecturer?"

"Don't students report? And shouldn't the administration act on such reports?"

"Few students dare report, because they could be in serious trouble if no action is taken. Sometimes they prefer just to transfer to another university."

"Why would action not be taken for such gross unethical and unprofessional conduct on the part of the lecturer?"

"Lilly, either you are really naïve, or that Muzunguland of yours is simply out of this world," said Britney, with a smile. "Don't you see that we live in a men's world? Can't you see that the university is and has always been a men's institution even when the VC is a woman? What can Miss Sabena Manley, our VC, do to change things when she is so surrounded by men? Men above, men below, and men by her side? Imagine never being alone and always feeling lonely. Her heart must feel like there is a hammer inside, every day she comes home. Even at home, whom is she expected to discuss her day with?"

"Her husband, if she had one" said Lilly Loveless, in agreement.

"I see you've done your homework on who's who at the University of Mimbo."

"Sort of," replied Lilly Loveless. "I happen to know that some mischievous students and staff have corrupted her name to 'Such a bad experience never again' from a woman however 'Manly'."

"Wow! I'm impressed by how much you've learnt about UM despite the strike."

"I also happen to know that she's suffering from breast cancer – poor her, and that when news of this filtered through to her closest male collaborators, one of them is said to have remarked: 'If the VC had given us the chance to fondle her breasts, we would have found the tumour before the doctor did, but her decision to live a solitary life is costing her dearly.'"

"Quite typical, isn't it?" Britney was irritated by the callous insensitivity. "But have you noticed that she walks quite elegantly even with her hands and feet tied?"

"Hmmm, you're right. Indeed. And can even run without taking off her shoes" Lilly Loveless agreed. "It must be tough for her having to cope with all these men who feel castrated by her power."

"But it isn't exactly true that male lecturers transmit only marks. Sometimes they transmit money, sometimes diseases, and often emotional stress and turbulence."

"So they transmit everything?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, and in the name of love, once in a while," said Britney, "which reminds me of a story I almost forgot." She searched her handbag and brought out a piece of paper. This is the copy of an email a classmate and friend of mine, sent to one of our lecturers. It speaks for itself:

'Hello, I suppose you had a safe journey back from Sawang. It seems just impossible for us to sit down and talk since I have a pile of work to do before the start of exams in June.

'Well, there is no one I can talk to again about this if not you, and I thought putting it in writing is the only alternative. I will thank you very much for being the one to take me through this experience, I trusted you for that and I took the risk because I knew whom you were and hardly like any person of your status. I suppose this is my first and last time to do this, I will never try again. It is so frustrating, nothing for me to gain – that is my emotions just run into a bottle whenever I think of whom I am dealing with, I develop a heart of stone and become very unromantic. That is not at all part of me and I hate not being myself anywhere. Each session left me cold and silly. I mean, I just feel so bad being put into the group of students who go out with married men because obviously they would say it is for money. No one knew of us but I have something I wish I never had and that is my conscience. It keeps telling me I have violated my principles and is no longer me. From now on, I will get very bitter towards any man who tries to play poker with me – no way, I am not that kind of a girl, now I discover, I cannot play that part I tried to play with you, it is not just for me. I need someone to love and be loved in return and not just to pleasure.

'I am tempted to believe that we both have something in common, but which is neither a sexual interest nor a romantic interest. We just judged it in a different light. I just think we feel more comfortable just talking and exploring each other's brain and getting ideas. At first, I was very curious to discover who was behind the so much talked about Manawah, my most exciting lecturer. Even though I saw you in class, I started noticing I really missed you at times and that was not fair for someone like me who can get so emotional because I kept reminding myself you do not belong to me and would never be. It was so painful you know, so I had to bottle up all my emotions or I could have gone off guard.

'Did you have to give me back what I gave you unknowingly? Too bad, I trusted you a little bit more than that. Anyway, it is OK I would carry my silly self to the hospital. I think you should do as well because I will always feel guilty if someone else contracts it. Well, thanks for the advice to be careful, I believe I have always been and would be more careful now not to mess up the way I have done. Having sex is not really of any great interest to me so I am off that for sometime. Let all the boys or men give me a break, I do not need them for now. Ha! Ha! You know, I am just telling you all this just to know I have gotten it out of me. I actually break down and cry, asking myself what is becoming of me. I have to turn over a new leaf and be what I used to be. Once in my life, though I really hate admitting I was innocent, I would say I was lacking in that field and that gets so much on my nerves, now I am so OK, I have experienced it and thank God it was with you. I hope the next person you get is not just what I am if that is part of your life, though I see you in another light.

'Goodbye Honeyboy and welcome Big Brother Manawah. I will feel very comfortable in this one, especially as you have known me a little too far, I could talk freely to you if it is OK, just that you are just too busy a man for even mere conversation. Even at tutorials, you are hardly alone enough. All this is to feel lighter and fall on my books. I would never forgive myself if my social life disturbs my education because it is my top priority for now.

'Thanks a million for everything and thanks for not being like the others. I wish you all the best, though I know you are capable of anything you

set your mind on. The little secret is safe with me but others might not be safe with other girls. Very few of us are left and I would hate you scandalised, so... from now on, I will be so indifferent and our brother/sister relationship is the one to stay. What I actually enjoyed with you was just conversing with you and seeing those mysterious eyes of yours which can deceive people who cannot read eyes and the way they laugh.

'You have some strangeness about you I have not yet read into and I will, I like to know all that there is to you. I hope I don't get jealous when you are stuck somewhere else. Anyway, I will not because it is over now. I am back on my feet again.

'I believe you would just laugh and say this is childishness. No, I wanted to talk it out though it is not really in the way I wanted it to be, but it is OK. Just get the idea. I would never attempt a letter again so please destroy this one as fast as possible. Thanks again.'

"Very moving story," commented Lilly Loveless. "So how come you got a copy of her email when she said she was going to keep their little secret?"

"He didn't even grace her with an acknowledgement of receipt," said Britney. "Instead, he proceeded to want to go out with one of Josiane's close friends. One day Josiane's friend mistakenly or deliberately sent her an email she had composed for Dr Honeyboy Manawah. 'Honeyboy sweetie,' the email read, 'Last nite I dreamt we were together at Miss World eating chicken and recounting what happened there the last time we were there. Suddenly Josiane came in and started hurling insults at me that everywhere she goes she sees you with me. That has to stop. I can't remember the rest of the dream but the next morning, I saw Josiane who stared at me with eyes of blades. I have also dreamt of us making love on the couch in your office. I wish to stop dreaming and have the real thing. I know it's never going to be mine forever, but I am ready and determined to enjoy and have the best of it while I can. Hurry up and be here soonest. I want to feel you deep and deeper. Always love and want you.'

"I can imagine Josiane hitting the roof," Lilly Loveless anticipated.

"Yes, she did," Britney confirmed, "And rightly so. There's just so much provocation that a girl can take. Initially Josiane did her best not to let what she termed 'such trivial tribulations interfere with her academic work,' which she, in order to cope, pretended was 'far more important and gratifying than the mundane pleasures and false security offered by a steady relationship'. But when Manawah appeared not to care much about her feelings and hurting them, she found herself in some strangely recurrent vicious circle of regrets, anger, sadness, feeling rejected – especially when Manawah virtually ran from one date to another, a horde of no doubt fascinating and attractive girls lined up, trying to win his heart. It infuriated her, though she didn't really understand why. She was not so much jealous of those girls, she thought, but of Manawah's popularity, the ease with which he flirted to and fro, taking in all the attention he wanted without really involving himself, the way he could keep all those girls waiting for him, his own personal love-reservoir... All this added up to such burning fury that pushed Josiane to make public both emails."

"With what consequences?"

"She was forced to drop out of Dr Honeyboy Manawah's course.

Until then she was a very bright student, but after the incident, she was unable to pass her exams."

"That's cruel."

"Cruelty is real, and women in a men's world are its biggest victims."

“It’s the twins,” said the daytime receptionist at Mountain View Hotel, clapping his hands together in surprise at seeing Britney and Lilly Loveless show up together all of a sudden, all dressed up in peach and purple. “Or the wildflowers,” he added, adjusting his eyes and trying to figure out which appellation was most appropriate for the apparition before him.

Britney combined colours with style. She looked stunning in a rich peach top with shiny purple embroidery around the scalloped neck and sleeves over a long purple skirt with a slit on one side. She had changed her hairstyle, putting it into curls, similar to those of Lilly Loveless, which bounced just above her shoulders. But she still used the same creamy lip gloss.

Lilly Loveless wore the gift Britney had offered her through her tailor of Desired Dresses: a purple top and a short peach skirt. Her curls were pulled back by a matching purple scarf that framed her face and gave her eyes a deeper dimension, the colour of African violets.

After greeting and teasing the receptionist, Britney surprised Lilly Loveless by asking for the key to room 22 – the same room where she had stayed for the first few days of her fieldwork.

On the way up the stairs, Britney explained that because it was not yet high season and there weren’t many customers, she had negotiated the room and arranged for lunch to be served to them there. She thought they would have fewer interruptions there than in the back room or one of the bars of the hotel. Plus it was her way, after so many months of working together, to make their last meeting for interviews special, before Lilly Loveless headed back to Muzunguland.

Britney unlocked the hotel room door and Lilly Loveless exclaimed when she saw a big bouquet of fresh purple daisies. Britney smiled and explained that they came from the gardener near the Lilies of the Valley rest house. She had picked them up as a gift. Lilly Loveless thanked Britney with a big kiss on the cheek.

Britney moved a chair to the balcony and Lilly Loveless followed suit. Britney went back for a small table. Lilly Loveless stood looking at the trees rising from around the swimming pool that still had no water, near where she sat waiting for Dr. Wiseman Lovemore some five months ago on her first morning in Puttkamerstown. She could still remember the sweet music of the birds in the trees welcoming her.

“Take off your shoes and get comfortable,” insisted Britney. “I feel really fresh today and we’ve got work to do.”

Lilly Loveless settled in one of the padded wooden chairs with rounded armrests and stretched her legs out against the wall of the balcony. She closed her eyes and breathed in the scent that wafted subtly up from vines in the courtyard. She rested her notebook on her lap and asked: “What’s that intoxicating sensuous and romantic fragrance?”

“Jasmine,” said Britney, “a special treat, you’ve worked so hard for the past five months...”

“Thank you,” Lilly Loveless got up and planted a kiss on Britney’s

cheek.

Britney smiled and fetched the recorder from the bag of Lilly Loveless, pressed record and set it on the small table. She started recounting her interviews.

* * *

"Michele," she said, "is practising to become a lab technician at a medical laboratory in town. She has never done economics, but if you sit and talk with her for a few minutes, you will think she's an economist where love is concerned."

Lilly Loveless was intrigued, "What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"You'll see," said Britney. "I know it's something she inherited from her mother because she is a businesswoman and does everything to take care of her invalid husband and their children. The first time Michele invited me to her house I didn't fail her. I knocked at her door but no one answered. I was wondering what type of a game she played when a girl, probably her friend, emerged from behind her room and asked me to follow her if I was looking for Michele. Just as we were about to take off, a policeman came and knocked at Michele's door. While the girl with whom I was going was explaining to him that Michele was not there, another gentleman arrived with a motor bike and asked for Michele."

"Michele was really in demand that day," noted Lilly Loveless.

"Yes she was," agreed Britney. "The girl said Michele was not around and that there was a notepad at her door. If they pleased, they could leave her a note. She told them that she had not seen Michele since the day before."

"Great demand, no supply eh?" Lilly Loveless played with the notion of Michele as an economist.

"We left these two gentlemen standing at Michele's door and went behind to this girl's room. When I entered her room I sat at her reading table. We chatted for about two minutes and then Michele emerged from behind the curtains that separated the bed from us.

"Most often when we meet we have nicknames with which we call each other. We laugh and chat off hand for some time before talking sense. This time I opened my mouth to shout, not only her nickname but also to inform her about her guests, but she placed a finger in front of her mouth. I stopped dead, looking at her strangely but she just smiled at me, got out of the bed and told me in my ear that she was mixing those guys outside."

"Mixing? To make what kind of cake?" wondered Lilly Loveless out loud.

Britney continued her narration. "After some time the other girl went out to see if the gentlemen had gone. She came back with the answer that the coast was clear.

"She and Michele had devised a means of running away from men they did not like beyond their money. They had created a middle door on the wall that separated their rooms so that when necessary, you could just pull it open and move straight into the other room. They had each bought a curtain and covered the door from both sides, giving the impression that the wall was continuous."

"Two mischievous friends?" asked Lilly Loveless, running the end of

her pen absentmindedly along the armrest of her chair.

"According to Michele," Britney continued, "she had seen me and the gentleman who walked to her door from a distance and was prepared to welcome us, but when she discovered the man on the bike, she immediately disappeared. Michele said that she wasn't going out with the man on the bike because she loved him. She said she had heard distressing stories about what the man with the bike did to girls and was determined to make him learn that women also have a brain."

"Hmmm ..." intoned Lilly Loveless, wondering how she intended to do this.

"She said she had swindled enough money from the man with the bike who had never and was never going to set eyes on any of her underwear. She let him spend plenty of money on petrol by coming to her door. She had also prepared psychologically to meet him at anytime. Thus, she was not expecting any surprise. She said that if she met him anywhere and he questioned her, she was going to ask him to get the hell out of her life and stop coming to her house and disturbing students who were reading with his ancient bike."

"What about the policeman?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"She had little knowledge about the man. He was a new customer and she was not going to spare him even the little Mim\$500 he collects from drivers.

"When we went back to Michele's room, she sat on the bed and just smiled at me. When I asked her what she was smiling at, she said: 'I know I have drained you of all the hopes you had in one.'"

"Had she?"

"Really she had," confirmed Britney. "Personally Michele had been my classmate for four good years. She was not only beautiful but had received a prize for good manners once in Form Five. I really wondered what had gone wrong in her life that she had changed so suddenly and abruptly. She might have been reading my mind because she furnished me with what men did to her just because she was good. She said love is a theory and it is the practical part that matters. This reminds me of my research methods lecturer here at Mimbo who likes to say that the test of the theoretical pudding is in the practical eating."

"Sounds nice," said Lilly Loveless, jotting down and underlining the phrase in her notebook.

"She advised me that love in real life is a mixture of lies and if I did not master how to play the game I might end up suicidal. When I asked her if she wanted to get married in future, she said her would-be husband would have to convince her that he would not be unfaithful. Even more, he must be capable of changing her perception because presently she enjoyed her tricks more than love."

"Hmmm..." said Lilly Loveless, "an interesting case."

* * *

"There's the case of Glenda, too," said Britney, easing into her next story. "Glenda is a student at UM. She comes from a family which could have been termed rich but for the fact that her father respects very much one important cultural value of Africa: that of having many children which entails

financial responsibility.

"Glenda has had two ambitions in life. First of all she wanted to present herself anywhere as beautiful despite the fact that beauty itself is relative. She intended to do this with all the artificial cosmetics and Muzungu fashion money can buy. Her preferences were so sophisticated that she didn't stand a chance just with the money given to her by her parents."

"So she thinks she can buy beauty?" asked Lilly Loveless rhetorically. "What's her second ambition?"

"Travelling abroad," said Britney. "Previously, she believed her father could sponsor her to study in Muzunguland. That is, until she grew up and discovered a string of so called 'illegitimate children' coming to the house and sharing with them the modest household cake."

"So how does she intend to manage?" asked Lilly Loveless, "go by boat or trek through the Sahara, and at whose cost?"

"She since transferred the responsibility of going abroad to her boyfriends whom she generally calls her fiancés. This ambition drew her to Mathias, her friend's husband and a businessman in Sawang. He gave her a lot of money in what is commonly known as 'encouragement fee', a sort of knock on the door to her heart, and promised her a holiday in Muzunguland. Mathias also promised to sponsor her Masters programme at a university in Muzunguland."

"A full package deal," said Lilly Loveless as she wrote notes.

"Little did she know," explained Britney, "that she had over-demanded from Mathias who now intended to drop her at the first opportunity. Then came the long vacation, during which Mathias had promised to take her to the dream of her life, Muzunguland. Instead, Mathias travelled with his wife and phoned Glenda telling her he could not do otherwise because his wife had insisted on coming along. Glenda received the phone call with a shock. She was too jolted to say a thing, so she promised to call the next day. After releasing a good amount of tension, she couldn't stand it till the next day. So in the evening, she dialled Mathias and lavished a handful of insults at him and then got the unexpected result of her life."

"What did he do?"

"Mathias told her to go to hell and never to come between him and his wife."

"Wow. She must have been terribly disappointed."

"Glenda could not believe it, but her friends believed it for her and so took time to make her understand until she finally changed her mind about the threats to Mathias."

"Good old friends who can tell you like it is and pick you up," commented Lilly Loveless. This was yet another example of women joining forces in solidarity with a sister in difficulties, she wrote in her notebook. But men being what they are, it is difficult to make them change their minds when they believe they've got what they wanted and must move on, she added.

"You might not be surprised to know that Glenda has picked up another guy, a flying-shirt who recently graduated from the university and is doing a Masters programme at a university in Muzunguland. She says this guy is preparing financially to let her come over."

"So she continues her deep water fishing for opportunities to fish in

foreign waters," commented Lilly Loveless.

"However, Glenda says that if she goes abroad, she's never going to stay for long with this guy. She's going to look for someone who is older and richer – a Muzungu preferably, whom she might end up marrying. 'You don't go to a restaurant only to eat what you cook every day,' she says. She sometimes calls herself 'Lady Luck', so I wish her the best of luck," said Britney, wrapping up.

"Glenda seems to be just as much an economist as Michele," suggested Lilly Loveless.

Britney got up when she heard a knock at the door. She directed the gentleman from room service to their small table on the balcony. He set down his trayful and Britney extended enough Mim dollars to cover their lunch and a tip.

Britney narrowed her eyes and said, "Let me tell you about Karina."

"I'm all ears," said Lilly Loveless.

"After many years of marriage, one day, as if stung by a bee, Karina's husband, in his 50s, married a second, much younger wife. Karina, who was in her early 40s, tried to live with the situation but finally tired of it and left her husband. She moved into an apartment, leaving the house they had built and shared as they raised their children together. Their children are now grown.

"Karina took on a boyfriend more or less her own age, who eventually moved in with her. Her husband continued with his young wife, showing her off around town and making Karina feel terrible as the woman who couldn't keep her husband. Things went along like that until one day seven years later Karina received an urgent call from her husband on her cell phone. He explained that he had just been bitten by a serpent and wanted to die in her arms. He was in tears."

"Hope not crocodile tears," said Lilly Loveless.

"Luckily, Karina had been trained as a nurse. She asked her husband if he could drive. He said he thought he might be able to. She told him to gather up the cash in the house as quickly as possible and drive carefully to the hospital. He did just that and Karina saved his life, and to this day he is still living – with his second wife.

"But I have the feeling," added Britney, "that Karina will soon chase away her boyfriend and rejoin her husband in their house. And he'll be real careful about how he deals with her."

"Why would he go back to a woman he has left?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Because he hasn't found in the new woman what he was looking for when he left her?"

"Which is?"

"Do I know? If really I could say what men look for in women, I'd set up a business counselling women what to do or not to do to get and keep their men," replied Britney.

"You really know how to dig out stories."

"That's what you paid me for, isn't it?"

"You've been like a flashlight to me over the last few months," complimented Lilly Loveless, "exposing the unseen and the unsaid, sending my thoughts spiralling this way and that way, and bringing out significant

lessons even in the shortest of your stories. I am truly grateful."

"Thank you. But I didn't tell you about Berthy yet," said Britney, determined to empty her basket of stories.

She got up and carried their lunch tray out into the hallway and brought the vase of daisies to the small table between them.

* * *

"Berthy has always been disappointed in love," began Britney, once again, as Lilly Loveless switched into her deep listening mode. "So much so that she had vowed never to show a gentleman that she loves him. She was determined to frustrate men just as she herself had been frustrated. Coming from a well-to-do family she strongly believed most men dated her because they were interested in her money and because she often spent a lot on such relationships."

"A rare story about a Mbomese from Britney," remarked Lilly Loveless.

Britney smiled and continued. "Thus, when she met Vammolt she knew she had caught another animal in her trap. However, Vammolt turned out to be the most loving and caring man she had ever dated and she soon found herself deeply in love with him. She dated Vammolt for one full year and then he proposed to marry her. She accepted, and he was encouraged to approach her mother. Vammolt told Berthy's mother, 'I have fallen in love with your daughter, and she has fallen in love with me. I have come to see if you'd have any objection if we get married.' The mother was very sceptical, perhaps because of the way men had come and gone in her life. All she told him was, 'Your ways and standards do not convince me that you are the type of man I want for my daughter', leaving him in doubt as to what exactly she meant."

"They both must have felt terribly disappointed," said Lilly Loveless. "Better to marry the man who loves you than the one your mother loves, won't you say?"

Britney continued, "Just that same year Vammolt was called by his elder brother to fly over to Muzunguland without any delay because his application for a job there had been accepted."

"Poor Berthy, what happened to her?"

"Vammolt finally left for Muzunguland and on that same day Alan, an earlier suitor of Berthy landed. Alan presented so many gifts to Berthy and proposed to marry her but she refused. He explained the situation to her mother and pleaded that she should help him. The mother, willing to venture this time, tried and failed because Berthy claimed she already had a husband. So Alan gave up.

"While Vammolt was in Muzunguland he constantly wrote and sent gifts to Berthy and her mother who had been forced to accept the situation. Vammolt finally proposed the day he would like to marry Berthy. Official arrangements were being made by parents of the couple, who had finally swallowed the fact that marriage sometimes has to do a lot less with birds of the same feather flocking together than with love.

"The day Vammolt came back to Mimboland, with the intention of leaving in a fortnight, he went shopping with his would-be wife. That is when they met Alice who was also buying a few items from a supermarket. Berthy

made the necessary introduction and Alice asked them when they would like to visit her. They gave her a date and left, wishing goodbye to her."

"I smell trouble," said Lilly Loveless.

"And there, indeed, was trouble," agreed Britney. "From the first day that Vammholt saw Alice, he had made up his mind to take her to bed but he had no idea that Alice had just finished her Masters programme and believed that she was a good match for Vammholt who had the same degree and had already got a job. Thus she did not see his marriage with Berthy as one that could yield any fruits because Berthy had dropped out of school when she failed the advanced level two times. 'Marriage being first and foremost about clout than about love, Vammholt can't be for my friend,' Alice resolved. She hated the fact that despite her superior education, she was not as successful with attracting men as was Berthy."

"That birds of a feather thing again," remarked Lilly Loveless. "Everyone is sizing up everyone else as they scheme to position themselves in relationships," she added and noted in her notebook.

"Yet, Berthy had even considered Alice as a possible bridesmaid, a sign that she hardly knew her friend."

"Haven't you heard that bridesmaids are there to protect the virginity of the bride?"

"Not in this case. There was no virginity to protect."

"What do you mean?"

"One thing Berthy had never revealed to Vammholt was the fact that she had a little daughter called Sheila. When Alice discovered this, she revealed it to Vammholt, told him that Berthy was a flirt and had aborted many times while he was in Muzunguland. She said Berthy did not even know the father of her child and that was why her parents adopted the child at birth."

In her notebook, Lilly Loveless noted the curious usage Britney made of the word 'flirt', which was not the same thing as teasing and tantalizing men but never going to bed with them. Berthy was more than just a flirt in that she went to bed with the men she teased and tantalized. Here was a clear case of the domestication of a word that made evident the importance of marrying text to context.

"Vammholt was totally confused at first because Alice was not only beautiful but he had a feeling that what she was saying was true. He had made love to Alice twice at her place and on that count knew that Alice was a better choice for him than Berthy. What surprised him most was that Berthy and Alice were very good friends and he did not understand why Alice should betray her friend to such an extent until the day he proposed to marry Alice and she accepted without any delay."

"A real stab in the back," said Lilly Loveless.

"However, that very evening that Vammholt learned of Berthy's secret, he called her into his room and told her that for so long she had kept a secret to herself because he was only a boyfriend but now that he was to be her husband he would like to know. Berthy understood that Vammholt must have learned of her child and immediately told him everything. What was interesting was that Sheila was with her father."

"So she knew the father after all," said Lilly Loveless.

"That very evening Vammholt warned Berthy never to visit nor

discuss any of their plans with Alice because she was the girl who betrayed her but he advised her to visit Alice once in a while and pretend as if her marriage with Vammolt was seemingly never going to take place.

"Vammolt also visited Alice and told her he was struggling to get her visa because the one he had made contained Berthy's name. He told her that immediately they finished with it they would marry quietly and leave without even informing anybody.

"However, Vammolt spent his time at the Muzunguland Embassy preparing a visa for Berthy. He finally booked a flight on the day he was to marry Berthy so that when they left the courtroom they could immediately leave for Muzunguland.

"Two days before the day he was to marry Berthy, he went with Alice to a hotel in Sawang and booked a room for two days. The first night he slept with Alice and then told her he was going to see his grandmother in the village to say farewell. That he would be back early in the morning so they could certify their marriage and leave for Muzunguland by 2pm.

"All the time that Vammolt spent with Alice, he told Berthy he was struggling to make her visa. He also told Berthy that Alice had gone to the village and had promised to be back only on their wedding day."

"Taking advantage of both women, eh?"

Britney ignored the remark. "So when the day came Alice was waiting in her hotel room for Vammolt to take her to court while Vammolt was getting married to Berthy.

"Brilliant," replied Lilly Loveless, before thinking if the problem was more Alice than Vammolt.

"Immediately after the marriage the couple and their parents came over to Sawang. While they were feasting and waiting for the flight, Vammolt left them to meet Alice in the hotel. He told her of a delay in granting her visa, so he had shifted the flights to 4pm. He settled his bills at the hotel and left a Mim\$10,000 note in Alice's purse. He went out claiming that he was going to bring in some court personalities so they could sign their marriage certificates at the hotel.

"Vammolt and Berthy left the airport at 2pm. A member of the hotel staff came to clear out Alice from the room. Just as he had knocked the door, entered and was about to explain to Alice, her cell phone rang. It was Berthy calling to tell Alice that she was on her way with her husband to Muzunguland."

"That was cruel," said Lilly Loveless.

"Cruel?"

"In a way the phone call was not necessary."

"Necessary or not, until today Alice is paralysed because of the shock she had when she heard the news."

"Isn't this Vammolt man what you call feyman?"

"You know about feymen? Where from?"

"I've read a few things here and there about these fraudsters who want to outsmart everyone. Was he clean shaven?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"Feymen are said to be almost always without any hair on their heads or chins, always neatly dressed and often in suits, as they are keen on creating the impression of being too concerned with doing business and striking deals

to attend to such banalities as combing hair..."

"Wow" said Britney. "Unfortunately, I don't know much about them, although I do agree that many bushfallers end up falling by the wayside in terms of morality and uprightness."

"Alice has moved on, I hope."

"When her sister told me the story she concluded that Alice has decided to be wicked to everyone because she believes men are very wicked."

"Hmmm," uttered Lilly Loveless, "her own wickedness bred wickedness, didn't it?"

"As we say in Mimboland, man ye man na man ye man. And man wey he shit for ye road, make ye no talk say ye don mash shit."

"Na true," said Lilly Loveless, show-offishly.

Britney took out her gloss and started applying it to her lips. Lilly Loveless had never seen her do this before. She watched, mesmerized. Britney returned the gloss to her bag and asked what Lilly Loveless was staring at.

"Your impressive lips," she replied without hesitating.

"Really?" asked Britney, bringing her eyelashes together in disbelief.

"Yes," said Lilly Loveless pensively. "Look at this." She dug in her bag for a notebook, with a red cover. Britney had noticed it in her bag before but had never seen her open it.

Lilly Loveless opened the red covered notebook slowly, sparking Britney's curiosity. She fingered through until she came to a particular page and started reading. First the date, which was several months earlier, and then something about Britney's lips.

Britney couldn't believe her ears. "You wrote that about my lips?"

"Of course I did, you think someone else wrote it?"

"No, of course not. I'm just surprised to learn about your secret notebook. Let me see it," said Britney, extending her hand.

Lilly Loveless hesitated.

"Don't," said Britney, "I don't want to read your secrets, at least not now, just turn it to the first blank page and hand it to me."

Lilly Loveless considered for a moment and accepted, and handed over her pen as well.

Britney started writing, and writing. After some time she set the pen on the small table and began reading, "The lips of Lilly Loveless ..."

Lilly Loveless broke out in laughter at Britney's creativity and asked for her notebook back.

Britney hesitated.

"Don't, I also just want the next blank page."

Lilly Loveless wrote and shared, just as Britney had. Her piece began with, "Britney's piercing eyes will scare some off and make others look twice or thrice ..."

"Bad," teased Britney.

The two of them continued like this, passing the notebook back and forth and filling it with insightful description underscored and infused with a certain intimacy.

Lilly Loveless shared with Britney two Muzungu jokes she had picked up from the Internet.

"An old woman is sitting on her veranda one warm evening in spring, when a strange but friendly young man comes and sits beside her, and starts to caress her thigh. Asked why she didn't stop him, she says, 'It felt good. Nobody had done that since my husband passed away some 40 years ago.' The young man began to caress her breasts and when asked why she didn't stop him, she said, 'His caressing made me feel all alive and excited. I haven't felt that good in years!' Asked what happened next, she said, 'Well, I was feeling so spicy that I just lay down and said to him: Take me, young man, Take me! But instead of taking her, the young man yelled, 'April fool!' 'And that's when I shot the little bastard!' she concluded."

Britney didn't find the joke funny, partly because she felt old people should be respected and celebrated, not laughed at.

Lilly Loveless told her second joke. "Not long after her wedding, a young woman complained to her mother about her husband's insatiable appetite for sex. 'He wants to do it as many times a day as he can get away with, any time, any place, any where - on the table, on the stairs, on the sofa, in the car, in the morning, in the afternoon, and in the evening. I can barely stand it!' The mother advised her daughter to tell him that she had her period, which seemed like a good idea. So that evening, when the husband came home from work, he proceeded to undress himself and his wife, when she stopped him. 'I'm sorry honey, but it's that time of the month.' The husband got up, looked at his wife, and said, 'It's all good honey. I understand.' He put on a robe and walked away. The wife was somewhat surprised at the mature reaction of her husband, until a few minutes later he returned holding two glasses and a bottle of champagne. So she asked, 'What's going on, sweetie?' 'We're celebrating!' he announced. 'Celebrating? What exactly are we celebrating?' wondered his wife. 'Anal sex week!'"

"Anal what?" Britney could see Lilly Loveless was really out to shock. Or was it the way with that Muzunguland of hers? "Weird world we live in," said Britney, clearly showing her distaste for what she had heard.

In her notebook, Lilly Loveless wrote, 'On sexuality and morality, another significant difference yet again between Britney and Adapepe. The one more traditional and conservative, the other more modern and adventurous...'

Not having succeeded with either of her jokes, Lilly Loveless went straight to the point. "How do you feel when you climax?" she asked, the idea being to test the limits of Britney's traditional and conservative perspectives.

"How do I feel when I climax?" Britney couldn't believe Lilly Loveless was asking her this question. Was it the beer? Had Lilly Loveless had a bottle too many? Or was it the fact they were together in Room 22 of Mountain View Hotel, talking intimately?

"Can't really say," Britney replied, hesitantly. "This is not something I talk freely about."

"Try. I am no stranger, am I? We have bonded over the months, haven't we?" Lilly Loveless urged.

"Yes, but..."

"Yes, but what? ... Do it for me please," Lilly Loveless insisted.

"OK," Britney yielded, reluctantly. Shifting uncomfortably, she began, "The intensity varies with each experience. Climaxing is the peak of the sex experience and it brings relief from all that tension. Although it is nice and relaxing, it is not what motivates me to have sex. What I mean is when you have an itch, you don't scratch it because of the relief, although the relief is a nice reward. You scratch it because you need to just scratch it and you continue scratching it because it feels nice to until relief decides to step in. If you get relief then the itch stops and it ends there."

Britney looked up. Lilly Loveless was listening keenly, her digital audio recorder on. She asked Lilly Loveless to switch off the recorder, which she did.

"The mood and that nice feeling are what make me do it. I love climbing up from one ledge to the other, savouring the experience until I get to the very top where there's no further ledge to climb and there's nothing but to fly and eventually come back to earth, with looks and cuddles and kisses."

Lilly Loveless wetted her lips with her tongue at the mention of kisses.

Britney noticed nothing.

"Tell me more," said Lilly Loveless.

"Tell you more?"

Lilly Loveless nodded.

"I like the crescendoing that renders me helpless," said Britney, "the moment I just let go and feel myself bursting through the roof and holding on tightly to my partner to the point where he must wonder if I'm going to break him. I lose track of time. I float. Then things lessen in intensity and the process is repeated again with even more pleasure than before. I relish it and find it almost out of this world. Then I come down. Things ease out gradually. 'Hello, diminuendo and relaxation.'"

Lilly Loveless refilled Britney's glass, one of the rare occasions she drank beer, and called room service to order a bottle of red wine.

"Do you flirt?" she asked, crossing her legs and looking Britney right in the eyes.

"You don't let up, do you, girl?" asked Britney, before adding "Lilly, this is for your ears only. If you expose my story to anyone, I shall never ever talk to you again." The beer was already playing tricks on her. Normally, she would never be caught telling a perfect stranger her intimate secrets, but here she was letting go with this Muzungulander she barely knew beyond the context of the research she was assisting with.

Lilly Loveless promised. The story was for her alone.

Was it the beer? Or was it perhaps the fact of knowing that Lilly Loveless did not belong and was therefore not in a position to use her story against her? Whatever it was, Britney, quite strangely, found herself opening up to Lilly Loveless.

"You do ask some difficult questions," Britney adjusted her position and sipped from her glass. "Difficult in the sense that answering them exposes me to you, and influences your opinion of me." Even then, she was not unaware of the dangers of trusting.

Lilly Loveless made a sign to say they were friends, adding, "I have

an ethical commitment to respect your dignity, privacy and confidentiality as an informant."

Not very convinced, Britney said, "I shall answer your questions because others have answered my own questions before and during this research I've done for you. And also because they give me the opportunity to articulate arguments I have made in my head over the years."

Lilly Loveless could see that Britney was still hesitant. She again reiterated that she was collecting data strictly for her research, adding that she had taken an ethics exam precisely to be in a position to protect the identities of her informants and the confidentiality of what they told her. Britney had said she didn't want her story shared, and so shall it be.

What would life be without trust – the licence we give someone to lie to us and be believed? Britney asked herself, deciding to give Lilly Loveless the benefit of the doubt.

"Everyone has the capacity to flirt depending on their mood," said Britney. "And I think moods are determined by hormonal secretions to a very large extent, flirting comes naturally to us when the mood hits. We sometimes do not even realise it when we flirt. It's all in the body language and this is why it's good for us to be able to read body language. Reading it well enables us to know where we stand with people. For instance, a friend you are trying to convince may be smiling and relaxed with you but if he's unable to look directly into your eyes, you know that there's something not quite right. Also interpreting your own body language can help you realise your hidden emotions by making you aware of the signals you are sending out and how to alter them if need be to adjust the message. Just watch, you'll see that people unconsciously cross their legs in the direction of someone they hanker for or simply appreciate. Women will expose their palms freely, without realizing it, when conversing with someone they feel attracted to or just tender toward."

Lilly Loveless readjusted her position upon mention of body language. She hadn't imagined, consciously, how much Britney was interested in such issues when she first set eyes on her the evening she arrived at Mountain View over five months ago. She also noticed that this time, Britney's usage of the word 'flirt' was conventional, which could mean that the previous connotations she gave the word must have come from those whose stories she was narrating.

"I could go on and on about body language but that's not the issue here," said Britney. "How I feel when I'm attracted to a man is the issue. I naturally flirt. I guess what I'm saying is this. I'm a flirt by nature even when I'm not in the mood. It just flows out. And I have to consciously tone it down sometimes. So people I dislike don't get the wrong idea and so others don't pick up on it when it's directed toward someone I'm attracted to. Needless to say, when I'm alone with that person, there's no need to fake it and the flirting comes out and in heavy doses."

"How interesting!" Lilly Loveless was visibly excited. "Tell me more."

"When I feel attracted to a man, I get this nice feeling all over my body and I can't get him out of my mind. I really watch and analyse his every move. I also feel good and comfortable around him, otherwise I can also feel tense, as if I'm fighting that attraction. But I like being around him nevertheless and often I fantasize about him but it does not mean I want to act

out the fantasy. Fantasies can be nicer when not acted. They can stimulate the mind. Sometimes it can literally be healthier to keep them in the mind. That's why John Keats wrote in his poem 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' during the era of Romanticism 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter; therefore ye soft pipes, play on; not to the sensual ear but more endeared, play on to the spirit ditties of no tone.'

Lilly Loveless felt a tear forming.

"In sum, that's how I feel when I'm attracted to a man. Hope my answer is good enough?"

"Super," said Lilly Loveless.

"Lilly, maybe you are also going to get more than you bargained for because I'm feeling quite tipsy. I'm also missing my husband now. I've mentioned Providence my fiancé who is studying in Muzunguland, now and again, haven't I?"

Lilly Loveless nodded.

"He says he is going to put diamonds in my nose. I have told him I want to wear a gold chain on my waist," declared Britney, proudly. "I really love being a girl. I love makeup, jewellery, clothes, shoes, perfume – lots of perfume, and just being fulfilled."

"Wow!" Lilly Loveless could visualise diamonds and gold dancing in her head. As for perfume, she had already remarked that Britney wore too much of it, as if uncomfortable with her natural body smells or as if her sense of smell was impaired.

"Providence is very intelligent, has a vivid imagination, enjoys stimulating conversations, is loving, tender and honest, and is very generous to me and my family. What else can a girl ask for in this day and age?" Britney felt confident and fulfilled.

"How did you meet?"

"We were students here at the university until two years ago when he obtained a scholarship to do his Masters in biological sciences. We have a daughter, who is staying with my mother back in our home village. I love Providence so much and I miss him all the time, plus I haven't made love with him in two years. Why am I going on about this?"

"Listen to your heart Britney," Lilly Loveless whispered. "It is therapeutic."

"I just feel like reaching out to Providence right now, to soothe his ears with these words: 'My Dear Providence, it is so difficult to imagine that you are so far away, where I can neither touch nor feel you. I miss you so much and cannot imagine it's going to be like this for a long time. I want to believe that, like you said, it is only physically and that you are going to be always by my side in spirit. I wish I could touch you right now...'"

"Don't stop, just go on, express yourself ... let go..."

"Providence, Darling," Britney went on, staring into the distance. "I need you and I will always do. You mean much more to me than you will ever imagine. I found in you those things that a woman considers precious. You taught me things in a special way like no one else would have done; I shiver in your embrace for example and want you more and more each time we start making love but I sometimes foolishly hide that desire from you. I now regret letting those moments slip by and only reminisce over them when you are away. Sometimes like now I really feel like having you inside me. Oh,

as I strike this keyboard alone in this room I just feel like making love to you. Oh, oh. I will lose my mind. ... I cannot go on writing until I can have you. I love you, think about me and make love to me let me feel it here all the way from Muzunguland. Every night I will be waiting for you. Please don't fail me. Always love you. I cannot find what you give elsewhere..."

Lilly Loveless was impressed by Britney's ability to fantasize not only about Providence but also about her being alone on her own and typing an email to him.

The bottle of red wine arrived. Lilly Loveless presented it to Britney saying: "Just for you."

"What for?"

"For all what you've done for me, and for just being you."

"But I'm the one who invited you to show my gratitude, so I should be the one offering things."

"You've offered a lot already. So this wine is to thank you."

"OK, accepted," said Britney. "But we must eat something the wine and all the beer we've been drinking could stand on."

Lilly Loveless accepted.

Britney, who knew the menu by heart, ordered pepper soup. Lilly Loveless settled for a brochette of the catch of the day, which turned out to be tilapia.

Britney continued talking. Lilly Loveless was pleased she was getting to know Britney beyond the research assistant of the past months.

"I have never sniffed cocaine before, never used hard drugs before. Nor smoked any form of tobacco or weed before. The closest I've come to smoking was taking two puffs of a smoking paper in order to get a feel of smoke inhalation when I had to write a piece comparing smoking and eating puff puff. Only that once and never again. So maybe I've never got high. I don't know how it feels to get high. The closest I've come to experiencing a high is that heady sensation I get when I am attracted to a man. When all my senses are attuned to him, heightened when I'm around him, feeling like someone falling through the clouds and loving every moment.

"You know what I'm saying? Nipples go hard and pointed like quills stalking desire, abdominal flip flops, and breathlessness."

Lilly Loveless nodded.

"Flirting is just a game to me. I don't flirt because I want to make love with a man. You never have sex with most of the men you come across. I just skirt around them and flit away before they strike..."

"So why do you flirt and flit?"

"It's just in me. I don't do it in a calculating way like men. Most of them are out to use or hurt you, with the exception of a few men like my Providence."

"So is it a power play thing?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Maybe I don't want anyone to be in control where I am concerned," Britney admitted. "When you are in control, you don't hurt easily. Do you?"

"I guess not." Lilly Loveless wasn't sure she understood.

"But I am not foolhardy."

Lilly Loveless passed Britney a tissue to clear her throat.

Britney thanked her and continued.

"Flirting is harmless teasing. Teasing is harmful flirting."

"I like that. May I quote it?"

"It's all yours," said Britney. "Isn't it what you are paying for?" she smiled, harmlessly. "I only tease a little. I teased Providence once when we were going out. He fell sick and wouldn't see the doctor. I made him promise me he would do that and he promised. The promise was on condition that I could do anything to him if he didn't see the doctor. I knew he wouldn't see the doctor but he thought he would do it. I know him more than he knows himself and had in mind what I was going to do to him. He would work himself to death if I allowed him and I'd more important plans for him because I'd marked him down to be my husband. True to type, he didn't go see the doctor. He forgot to because he was working. I ranted and raved till he did but I'd already won that bet."

"What did you come up with?" Lilly Loveless was curious.

"I said to him, 'Pack a weekend bag. We are going away for the weekend. Put off your phone. No studying all weekend.' He thought it was a big joke. So off we went down to Sakersbeach to stay with a friend of mine and visit the beach. He needed to relax and that was exactly what I intended to make him do. When we arrived at Sakersbeach, he surprised me. He had enough money on him for us to rent an affordable hotel, which we did."

"And then?"

"Once in the hotel room, I just held him whilst he slept because he had read and worked so hard all day and was so tired. He slept throughout the night and in the morning he felt better. When he woke up I was wearing a transparent top but he didn't realize. I didn't expect him to, initially anyway. So we started watching some DVDs we had taken with us. After a while, I just blurted out that my bra was making me uncomfortable, shrugged out of it, flung it somewhere, and went back to watching the movie with all innocence. That was when he realized my blouse was transparent."

"What did he do?"

"Oh men! I felt him tense up but I was not letting on. All I was doing was innocently watching a DVD. To tell you the truth, I don't even remember what that DVD was about. He slowly went berserk. We had a beautiful weekend. When we came back home, he said we were going to go away more often."

"How lovely."

"I flirt a lot but I only tease a man when I know I'm ready to have sex. I enjoy sex when I make love but I'm not a connoisseur of lovemaking. I don't collect sex for the sake of memoirs. I do it when it feels right and beautiful. The kind of sex that composes music, not noises. Sweet melodious music, spiritual harmony, not the cacophony of rain and hailstone on zinc roofs in a hailstorm. The kind of sex that makes both of us feel the other is very special even afterwards and not the sex that ends up making you feel used and debased."

"This means one night stands and flings are not your thing?"

"That's right," said Britney. "So what happened to me last year? I still don't understand. But I was already starving and though I tried to resist, I was weak. So I lost control. But I take consolation in the fact that it didn't end up in sex. I don't want to ever lose control again, so help me God."

"I'm listening," said Lilly Loveless.

"I don't know how to say this, but a few weeks ago, I met someone

from Nyamandem. Not a Mboma, but a young man of my age group, slightly older. Something clicked and we had a fling. He's since gone back to Nyamandem."

Lilly Loveless crossed her legs the other way, her chin resting on her fist, her ears straining. "So you do have flings after all," she said, half question, half statement.

"Last night I called him and felt chastised. He said so many things. We've talked countless times but last night, the talk was deeper. I don't even know what I'm saying. I'm a bit disorientated. I didn't realise he would miss me that much or that my failure to get in touch would hurt him so much. It has dawned heavily on me now that he doesn't want to lose touch with me. Despite everything, I still like him and it would be difficult to walk away if he doesn't want to let go."

"Some have said there's no such thing as a fling. Emotions are hard to police, illegal or not, and few want to settle for emotional undernourishment," said Lilly Loveless, at the same time as she wrote it down in her notebook.

"Meanwhile, guilt keeps eating at me and it gets heavier with time, the guilt, I mean. Perhaps partly because I realise that even distance and the passage of time do nothing to deaden the attraction, the emotions. Perhaps because some important people in both our lives would be devastated if they got to know. Perhaps because I turned my back on promises I'd made elsewhere. Perhaps because I discovered another part of me that I had never even imagined existed – that part that doesn't apply gears of control, that wants to be set free and go wild."

"The 'girl gone wild' part of you," suggested Lilly Loveless.

"Absolutely," agreed Britney. "He said that if he hadn't been wary of the complications of breaking his commitments to his wife when he met me, he should have been with me by now. He even extracted a promise from me that I'd call him tonight at a set time. I wasn't prepared for that level of intensity. I find myself going back but I know it's not the best thing to do. Or maybe, we are destined to finish off what we started in order to put it behind us? So help me. Help me God!"

"I'm sure you'll come through it OK," Lilly Loveless sought to reassure her.

"Thanks." Britney truly needed all the help she could get. "Honestly, were it not for distance, there is no way this new guy Ted could threaten Providence."

"Good. I'm sure you can manage distance by applying yourself to your studies and work. Fortunately your hands are full with work, and getting fuller by the day."

"Providence is a Godsend!" Britney recalled. "Before he left for Muzunguland, we were the perfect couple in the student community. He helped me clean up the house, made the bed, did the dishes for me anytime I cooked, and would go out of his way to bring me flowers, harvested from a nearby garden along his way to see me."

"That's sweet."

"He even helped me in the kitchen by chopping vegetables, doing this and that for me."

"It's too good to be true," Lilly Loveless said with an air of

scepticism.

"I'm serious, in God's name," Britney swore.

"I believe you."

"Sometimes, he would bring me lunch at the university, prepared or heated up by him."

"Lucky girl."

Britney laughed appreciatively. "Yes, I believe I am. I've told him not to change or else. He says I shouldn't change either. Well, and the more we made love, the better it got. That much I remember. Just imagine! Each time I discovered a new side to him, the good sides always outweighed the bad. I feel so lucky."

Lilly Loveless eyed her curiously. "No fights, ever?"

"Of course we fight, but they never last."

Britney paused for a while then added, "His mom is the problem though. She doesn't like the fact that Providence loves me. She hates me. When Providence was here, she didn't want him spending much time with me. I don't know what I've done to her, but when she sets eyes on me, I can almost hear her stomach start to churn. Sometimes I think the reason might be the fact that Providence lost his dad when he was a boy, and has grown up not only fathering himself, but also serving, in a symbolic way, as husband to his mom. But I loved every little time we had to ourselves. He would save up his meagre earnings, only to buy me a gift or to take me out. And once in a while on weekends, he'd even bring a bottle of wine along to my place, and we would drink it together, listening to music all night long."

Just then Britney's cell phone rang. She identified the number of the caller with a sigh, and ignored the call.

"Why don't you answer?" Lilly Loveless was curious.

"It's my good friend Lovejoy, but I don't want to take the call. I'm going to tell you why but please don't expect me to be kind to him in my narrative because I am very angry with him."

"OK," said Lilly Loveless, even more curious.

"He's not trustworthy," Britney told her. "He's been pursuing me with the hope that someday I might allow him to just inhale the scent of my panties."

Lilly Loveless tried not to show the twitch in her face.

"He's like a leech. I tried to peel him off my skin several times, but no! He wouldn't budge."

"Interesting," Lilly Loveless wetted her lips with beer. "What did he do instead?"

"He is a funny guy. What hasn't he done? He has showered me with so many gifts, appointed himself my personal chauffeur, become my bodyguard-cum-stalker, invaded my space, and turned into a cry baby whenever I ask him to leave me alone. He is obsessed with me."

Britney's cell phone rang a second time. Britney ignored the call again and this time turned the phone off.

"And you ignore all this attention?"

"I'm not going to sleep with him because of all his dramatisation. This is a guy who lacks quality. No good sense of dressing, no fine way of speaking, bad grammar, a terrible accent, a pervading body odour crowned with a condition I simply have to diagnose as halitosis."

Lilly Loveless laughed.

"You'd think these would be enough for him," Britney laughed. "Surprise, surprise, sur-pr-i-s-e! He SPOKE with his mouth full, picked his nose and chewed gum in public like a cow chewing cud. Such a guy! I wouldn't have been able to kiss him even if I'd wanted to for fear that his 'fragrance' would exacerbate my asthma."

Now Lilly Loveless understood why Britney sometimes spoke as if she was short of breathe.

"Why don't you blow him off," asked Lilly Loveless?

"He is a nuisance I had to tolerate not just because he was sometimes convenient, but because I hated to see him cry. Till I realised what a snake he is..."

"A snake? Really? In what way?... Smooth operator?"

"When he met my friend Vicky, he pretended he didn't like her. He even made a face as if he had just chanced upon maggot-infested carcass when he told me she was not pretty at all when all the time he was designing ways to lure her into assuaging his libido. He thought I was stupid but he knows better now."

"What happened? Tell me all."

Britney smiled. One of these days she will explain to Lilly Loveless the Mimboland equivalent of curiosity kills the cat.

"Just imagine. He came to tell me he had a dream in which Vicky approached him for his cell phone number but he refused to give it to her with the excuse that she and I were friends. But in the dream, Vicky insisted that I already had someone so it was no big deal. To tell you the truth, that was what gave him away."

"How?"

"Why would he tell me such a dream even if it was true?"

"To strain your friendship with Vicky?"

"Exactly! He wanted to mar our friendship. He thought wrongly that he was smart enough to emulate the strategy of our calculating colonial masters: divide and rule. He wouldn't have let on about this so-called dream if he had envisaged the outcome."

"So what happened?"

"So what do you think? Was I surprised when Vicky told me Lovejoy had been calling her behind my back? No, I wasn't. It didn't surprise me at all."

Lilly Loveless shook her head in empathy.

"An incident happened some months back that made me suspect Lovejoy would do something stupid. He came right here to Mountain View to pick me up after work and as Vicky used to work here with me and was then stuck on a call with a customer, I asked him if we could wait for her. It made sense to wait for her as Vicky and I lived together at the same place as well."

"I bet he didn't," interjected Lilly Loveless.

"He didn't. Lovejoy was reluctant to wait with the excuse that he was in a hurry so we would have to leave Vicky to make her way home by taxi. So we left and he dropped me off at my place and said he had to rush somewhere. Now, that was a first! Lovejoy never left in a hurry to any place when I was around. It appeared strange to me but I was glad because I wanted him to leave anyway."

"Five minutes later, as I was making dinner, Vicky walked in, to my amazement. So I asked her how she got home so early and she told me my friend Lovejoy had come to pick her up.

"What?! You don't mean it."

"True. But I never asked Lovejoy and true to type, he never mentioned it to me either. And this incident happened before he told me about his ridiculous dream."

"So how did things reach the present stage where you don't want to answer his calls?"

"I eventually had to move out of my old place. When I left Vicky quickly moved into my room because she preferred mine to hers."

"Was hers that bad?"

"One thing I didn't like about Vicky was her desire to be like me. But she can't be like me."

Lilly Loveless grinned.

"Neither can I be like her. It would be boring if she was me because then there would be no mystery to her and she would be boring."

They both laughed.

"Anyway, Vicky approached me at work one day and said Lovejoy had been calling her on the land line which our landlord had installed as an extra incentive to keep us as tenants. Lovejoy knew that number because he used to call me on it. Vicky said Lovejoy was after her cell phone number but she had refused to give it to him. I told her that was quite surprising because the last I heard, she was the one chasing Lovejoy for his cell phone number – albeit in his dreams!"

"You are vicious!"

Britney laughed.

"Of course Vicky did not like that at all and looked somewhat rattled when she realised that Lovejoy had mentioned her to me in the first place. I told her I had no interest whatsoever in Lovejoy and if she wasn't interested in him as well, we could come together and teach him a little lesson for attempting to mess us about. We could beat him at his own game. I intimated to her that she could take advantage of him and enjoy his financial goodwill before leaving Puttkamerstown, as she was due to relocate, having completed her studies."

"You do like to be in control, don't you? So what did she say?"

"Vicky became very quiet after this, a bit withdrawn even from me, couldn't look me in the face anymore and things became kind of tense between us for some days which led me to suspect, perhaps rightly, that Lovejoy had had his way with her."

"Poor thing," said Lilly Loveless.

"It's her cup of tea," Britney insisted before continuing. "Two weeks later, I was relaxing on one of the couches during break at work when Vicky came and sat across from me and told me she was up for the game. I asked her if she wanted to take him shopping and she said that would be a bit tricky for her because she mainly wanted just a cell phone. And I thought, 'Why not?' After all, if Lovejoy wanted Vicky's cell phone number, why shouldn't he buy her the phone in the first place?"

"No phone no phone number, eh? Smart reasoning," said Lilly Loveless.

"As Vicky didn't know how to go about it, I told her I would be the one to mention it casually in a conversation with Lovejoy that she, Vicky, had dropped her phone in water or into a pit latrine, or had to get a new one because the old one had stopped working. Then later when Lovejoy sneaked to her place behind my back, she could work on getting her phone from that angle. Her story would be all the more credible because I had already mentioned it to Lovejoy."

"Evil genius you are!"

"Unfortunately for Lovejoy, before I could pass on the message, I had an accident with one of my cell phones which rendered it unusable. So I decided to get two phones instead of one: the first phone for me of course, and the other one for Vicky. I probably appear selfish but I had my reasons."

Lilly Loveless felt slightly ill at ease. She remembered her methodology courses on the importance of objectivity in research. "Britney, I'm here not to judge you but simply to hear your story, so don't please feel I think you are selfish."

"That statement was more for me than for you," Britney reassured her.

"Back to the story," said Britney. "So I got a new phone from Lovejoy for myself. It was quite easy because he had been wondering what to get for me for my Christmas present. The new phone therefore became my Christmas gift from him."

"Father Christmas named Lovejoy bearing a cell phone!"

"When he brought the phone, I deliberately asked him if he saw a cheaper phone when he went to the phone shop. Naturally, he wanted to know why I was asking him that question so I casually mentioned to him as planned that Vicky wanted a cheap cell phone to buy as her cell phone had fallen into water and she was 'broke.'"

"How did he react?"

"From his countenance after I'd told him this, I realized that he was thinking of how to help his Vicky."

Lilly Loveless smiled internally, remembering that Britney was apparently an adept reader of body language.

"At that point I really couldn't be bothered," continued Britney. "When I got home that night I called Vicky to inform her that I had set the plan in motion and it was up to her to 'play up' if she wanted to get her phone."

"You're terrific."

"That's the same thing Vicky told me," said Britney. "At any rate, I left for a two-week holiday to Zintgraffstown. Whilst I was there, Vicky called to tell me she had succeeded in getting her phone from Lovejoy but she needed one more thing from him and wanted my help, as Plan A had worked perfectly."

"I bet you were eager to come up with a Plan B."

"I was, and I did, of course! Vicky was due to go back to her parents in Nyamandem for good the following week and she needed to do some more shopping and wanted Lovejoy to bear the cost of her shopping spree."

"You demons."

"She only had five days. Vicky had not told Lovejoy she was leaving and was not going to tell him at all. So we had to draw up Plan B."

"And what did you come up with?"

"In this plan, Vicky was to get the funds she needed from Lovejoy by promising to pay at the end of the month when she received her salary, by which time she would be long gone out of Puttkamerstown anyway."

"Ingenious. Some would say cruel."

"I got to Zintgraffstown the night before Vicky was to leave Puttkamerstown but was unable to call her. However she called me the next day when she was about to leave for the bus station to tell me Plan B had been successful."

"Really?" said Lilly Loveless, excitedly.

"She did. Vicky had succeeded in collecting her shopping money from Lovejoy with the explanation that she needed some funds to pay her rent in order not to be ejected from the house. Also Vicky told Lovejoy that as she had not been able to pay her rent the previous month, she needed a loan to pay her rent for two months. The loan, she said, would be paid back at the end of the month when she received her salary."

"Brilliant!"

"Vicky left Puttkamerstown that day and a week later I had the satisfaction of breaking the news that she had left for good to Lovejoy who didn't take it well at all. He got angry but I was gloating."

"Are you still in touch with Vicky?"

"Now I don't contact either of them anymore. I simply have no use for Lovejoy anymore, and I just can't trust Vicky so there is no point in her hovering around in my life. After all, she did try to play by the rules but that was only after she realized that Lovejoy had taken her for a ride. The bottom line is she slept with him when she knew he was still interested in me, most probably with the idea of getting him to switch his attentions to her, very much like Alice in one of the stories I collected for you. Too late she realized her method would not work so she switched allegiance. The mere fact that the rain beats the leopard does not mean it washes its spots away."

"That's a good one," said Lilly Loveless, jotting down the expression about the leopard in her notebook.

"Some days back he sent me a card saying 'true friends are the alphabet of one's life.' urging me to accept him, believe in him, call him just to say 'hi,' don't give up on him, envision even the unfinished parts of him, forgive his mistakes, give unconditionally to him, help him, invite him over, just be with him, keep him close at heart, love him for who he is, make a difference in his life, never judge him, offer support to him, pick him up and play with him, quiet his fears, raise his spirits, say nice things about him, tell him the truth when he needs to hear it, understand him, value him, walk beside him, explain things he doesn't understand, yell when he wouldn't listen and zap him back to reality. At the end of his defective and dishonest alphabet, he said, 'Please Britney I need U Back!'"

"What did you say?"

"My answer was simply: you've never had me!"

"Is he married, Lovejoy? What line of work does he do?"

"He is married to a very beautiful girl, in what some four years ago was the wedding of the year. But you needed to hear the disparaging things he told me of his wife. He's a cheap, mean, little bastard. To tear your wife down in front of some other woman just because you want to sniff her panties

doesn't speak well of any man. Such a man deserves to be shown red, and Vicky and I did indeed show him red pepper."

"What line of work?"

"He is one of those spoilt boys and pampered bastards whose bread is buttered on both sides. He grew up rich and, thanks to bribes, was able to make his way into the club of state treasurers, guaranteed 10 per cent on every payment they make on behalf of the government."

"Great," said Lilly Loveless. "I'd like to hear a bit more about Providence."

"What about him?"

"Everything."

"That's impossible. It would take you the next six months and more of research time just to hear the story of Providence and I."

"So tell me what you can. Has he always been the man in your life, your Mr Right?"

"You really are nosy, aren't you Lilly?"

"Yes, I am, research is a nosy business," Lilly Loveless defended herself.

"It is more than just research. Not everyone can be a good researcher, so you've got to be of a nosy nature to be a good researcher," argued Britney.

"That makes the two of us then," said Lilly Loveless. "Birds of a feather, wouldn't you say?" She could still hear the birds chirping away just outside the window.

Britney smiled broadly. "OK, a little more about Providence then."

"Thanks."

"Providence was not my classmate here at Mimbo. He was doing biological sciences, but he was keeping the same circles as some of my classmates with whom he went to the same secondary and high schools. He admired me, but I admired someone else."

"That's usually the case isn't it?"

"That someone else, a boy in the same class as I, and indeed a friend of Providence's, was a ladies' man. He made me pregnant and abandoned me with the pregnancy and left for Muzunguland where his posh family wanted him to study. I suffered with that pregnancy a lot. But Providence stood by me all this while. He even owned up as the person who had impregnated me when my parents started asking questions. They almost ate him alive, but he stood by me and eventually weathered the storm."

"That was most gallant of him," said Lilly Loveless, "and rare at this day and age, I must say."

"Yes, but when my daughter was born, I received a letter from Donald, her runaway father. Each time I read the letter my heart swelled with anger."

"If you remember the letter, it would be great to reconstitute it for me. I'm dying to know what he had to say for himself."

"Sorry to have to disappoint you Lilly, but I can't remember that first letter he wrote. I tore and drowned it with my tears, because all it did was renew wounds I wanted to forget."

"I can understand," said Lilly Loveless. "Sometimes the best thing to do is just to move on."

"But it isn't always easy either," replied Britney. "At least, in my case,

it wasn't. Although Providence stood by me and readily assumed fatherhood of my daughter, I didn't immediately respond by taking him on as my boyfriend. Quite strangely, my anger and disappointment with Donald started to die down, and somehow, I would catch myself thinking of him, angrily."

"Did you write? Did you phone? What happened?"

"Your impatience hovers over the rooftop, Lilly. Yes, I wrote, and he replied, and I wrote, and he replied..."

"Remember any of the letters?"

"Yes, quite strangely, and verbatim for some."

"Tell me more. I want to hear as much as you can remember."

"One of his letters stands out well. It was one he wrote in response to one of mine in which I was still very angry, and eager to make him feel just how angry and disappointed with him I was..."

"Tell me... Did he start the letter with 'My Darling Britney...?'"

"How did you know? He indeed did. He called me 'Darlin' Brit', which was the way he would refer to me. As he liked to say, he wanted to be able to call me a name others did not use."

"He was loving, after all."

"But not responsible," retorted Britney. "Responsibility is key, you know."

"So what do you remember from the letter?"

"The letter went thus, I think: 'Darlin' Brit, I just got done reading your letter the 5th time and each time I read, I have the urge to start replying while reading, but each time, my pen gets heavier to pick up and respond. Even now I have to write with caution.'"

"That must have been because of the venom you injected into the pages."

"Yes, I was biting in the letter. 'Brit,' he went on, if my memory doesn't fail me, 'the first paragraph or two in your letter sent me smiling like an excited monkey, oh! I am reading from my sweetheart. But when I delved into the real stuff, the bomb you had so carefully embedded in the letter, every single vein on my face stood out, and my face was dark, it was as though I was at an interview with a demon. Then I managed to read through, and the energy that I used to read drained me and I almost collapsed. I stood dumbfounded, angry, sad, confused. Then I shouted aloud: How dare, how dare thee talk to thee lover prince Donald in such a vile fashion? Thy letter beest the greatest challenge thy lord hath faceth. And for a good couple of days and even now, thy letter remains a miasmatic fog that casts an evil veil over my conscience, probing me to search into my conscience and eradicate the devil that hath so corrupted its content.'"

"When I read this section of his reply, at first I thought he was mocking me, not taking seriously what I had gone through."

"But he sounds mocking, light hearted."

"If I didn't know him better, I would have confirmed that impression, but he was always in love with such an old fashion manner of speaking, and of course, I always referred to him as my prince."

"I see," said Lilly Loveless, not totally convinced. "So what else did he say?"

"He revisited all the trying moments and how he had not lived up to

his responsibilities. This is more or less what he wrote: 'Darlin' Brit,' he wrote, 'I got a lot to tell you. And so I beg your patience to sit still and read through. I was very hurt when I read through your letter. But then, it is a kind of an eye opener to me. And I only realised how bad I have been hurting you by writing crap all the time. I feel like the monster that possessed me to run away from you when I should have been running to you. I have disappointed you repeatedly. And as the saying goes, even a worm can bite when pushed to the wall, and I admit that I had finally pushed you to the wall and it was time for you to strike back. And as it goes, a thief is most annoyed when he is robbed, because he thinks he is the only one who can rob people.'"

"What did he mean?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"Just listen," said Britney. "He went on to say how sorry he was for all his failings in my regard. 'Darlin' Brit, I am very sorry, I never really intended to disturb your state of mind, especially in a period when you need a lot of peace. And although you got most of the stuff in my letter wrong, I believe I am the one who gave you cause to do so. And though you won't believe it, I lied when I said I had stopped loving you and was pretending all along. Instead, I have always loved you and I still do. Even though I have never been really fair to you, I still have my feelings for you. And Darlin' Brit we all fall to temptations and we all make mistakes.'" Britney sighed incredulously.

"I felt like asking him to tell me what mistakes I had made with him," said she. "As far as I was concerned, he had monopolised the mistake making in our relationship."

"Men are very good at using that ploy when they have little to say for themselves," agreed Lilly Loveless.

"This particular letter was long," Britney went on. "I had taken time to give it to him in my letter, and he was taking his time to reply to all the charges I had laid before him. 'I know it's going to be hard for me to restore my image in front of you,' he wrote. 'All you know is that I am an arrogant pig. And what burns in my throat, is the feeling that you may think it is because I am in Muzunguland that gives me cause to be arrogant. But I suit myself when I think that you had always accused me of arrogance since when I was still back home in Mimboland. Even though I cannot change your conceptions, I just want you to understand that at the moment of writing, I never intended to convey any arrogance. Instead I am an unhappy guy who is bitter and angry of having lost the love of his life to some ingrate.'"

"He dared to call your Providence ingrate?"

"At this time, I wasn't yet going out with Providence, as such, but it was rumoured all over that I was. Providence himself did much to sustain that rumour, as he went about telling friends and relatives that he had done what a man is supposed to do by owning up to fathering my daughter."

"Love is never really straightforward, even less so, people's reasons for loving," said Lilly Loveless, images of Martin, her former boyfriend, flashing through her mind for reasons she couldn't quite fathom.

"Then Donald wrote: 'Darlin' Brit, I love you and you know that the me who disappointed you is not the me you know. I am a quiet guy, humble, respectful, but who would go at great lengths to keep what he believes belongs to him.'"

"Bullshit," shouted Lilly Loveless. "He didn't keep you when it

mattered, did he?"

Britney continued her recollection of the letter, amazed by how much things had stayed fresh in her mind despite the passage of time. "Donald wrote, 'But I would not totally deny your allegations. I think I am sick, losing my morals and character. Forgive all the indecent words I used in my letter and all the abuses and I promise I would never use them again on you.'"

"What right did he have to hurl abuses at you?" Lilly Loveless looked questioningly at Britney. "Since when did the tables turn?"

"I don't think the tables changed, but he was trying to take advantage of all the rumours about Providence and I. But the letter was all about his guilt. 'I admit I was very mean,' he continued, referring to running away when I was pregnant after trying in vain to persuade me to abort the pregnancy. 'I never really intended that. Sometimes I behave like a mad man. Even the harsh letter I wrote to you was never intended. All I intended was restoration of a dying relationship. But with the wish of trying to justify my actions, all the bad things I have done to you. I had to do that in reminiscence to your inappropriate acts too. And as soon as I was down memory lane, I just got angry and went off totally. I am really sorry. What I did and said was uncalled for. Darlin' Brit, I am willing not to ever mention the past and if I don't have anything good to say to you, I should rather keep quiet.'"

"He wakes up rather too late in the day, doesn't he?" remarked Lilly Loveless.

"It wasn't yet too late," countered Britney. "Like I said, I found myself missing Donald more and more, despite his heinous crimes."

"Isn't it strange, this animal called love? Very tolerant yet extremely dictatorial."

"Absolutely," Britney agreed, and continued with her recollections. 'I have been wrong and very childish and selfish, in that I have always wanted you for myself, wanting all of your attention, and that is really bad. But that is mostly because of my love for you. I had failed to accept the other side of you. That you are very friendly. Extend my apology to all your friends that I may have said some inappropriate things about. That was just part of my jealous fuelled rage. I realise that no matter how disappointing my friends are turning up to be, you have never really bordered to bring them between us, and I really appreciate and admire you for that.'"

Britney paused briefly, took a sip, and continued.

"As you see, he came short of naming Providence, whom he continued to feel, quite unjustifiably, despite my repeated attempts to pump reason into his jealous heart, had stabbed him on the back."

"I would say he lost his mind," said Lilly Loveless. "That is, if he ever had one."

For a moment Britney wondered if Lilly Loveless would be so outspoken in her condemnation of Donald, had she not made it known that her heart was now firmly with Providence. Or was Lilly Loveless seeing herself in Britney's story? Whatever the reason, Britney didn't dwell on it.

"I don't know what spell he was going through in his social life out there in Muzunguland, but his letter was that of a man disturbed not only by our strained relationship. He continued: 'For once, it keeps dawning on me that you are the only true friend I ever really had. Also, the same friends I curse all the time were there for you when I wasn't. You know what I am

talking about. I think I have been stupid listening to people. Let your friend Josiane know that I don't have any grudge against her, and that people can poison your mind into having confrontations with people who never had any direct conflict with you. For once I am really ashamed of that."

"What was he on about?" commented Lilly Loveless. "It is true that your story is unusually rich, and that it would take more than a short research trip like mine, to get to know you in your fullness."

Britney looked at her with eyes of 'I told you so,' and continued her recollection. "Donald wrote something to this effect: 'Talking about the offer I made about your rent, bills, etc., I was shocked at the manner in which you treated it. Again I don't blame you. Maybe the other contents of my letter infuriated you into misjudging everything. Darlin' Brit, I have pity for you quite alright but not through the way you see it. You think I would have pity for you because I am in Muzunguland, I am proud... If that is it, then, you got it all misconstrued.'"

"What did he offer to do with your rent and bills?"

"He said he would like to help pay them," replied Britney. "Indeed, he was about to send me money electronically, and was encouraging me to open an account so as not to keep going to Muzungu Union to collect money."

"And you turned down the offer?"

"Yes, tempting though it was. Poverty has a way of compromising one's dignity, you know." Britney looked up at Lilly Loveless. "But I resisted."

"You did well," said Lilly Loveless, full of respect. "Better to be poor in dignity than rich in chains."

"That's the idea, but as you know as well, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. With us like with Christ, the way to Calvaries is full of challenges, falls and detours... and not enough Veronicas."

"That's profound, Christian though I'm not," whispered Lilly Loveless.

"You don't have to be a Christian to appreciate the wisdom of Christ."

"Thanks for reminding me."

Britney continued: "Donald continued on the same point of dignity and misery. 'I have never thought for one moment that you are miserable or lost or whatever,' he wrote. 'That would be very inhumane. Remember, all I know is that no condition is permanent. And I would never, and I swear over my beloved and deceased dad's grave that I would never ridicule, reduce another individual's pride just because I think I am in a comfort zone.'"

"I only wish he could keep his actions where his words are," Lilly Loveless interrupted.

Britney ignored her and continued. "On derogatory remarks I accused him of making about my parents, Donald explained himself: 'That is not part of me and it would never be. I never said your dad was a stupid man who died without leaving you guys with any money, or that your mum doesn't work... or whatever. All I know is that, I know what it means to lose a loved one, things would not run smoothly as they used to. And it was just out of my love and care for you that I had to ask someone about your situation and I am very sorry I was given an utterly wrong impression. But don't take it

that talkative and pompous Teddy wanted to make fun out of you. I am really doubting him now. He told me he always visits your mum and you and you all have a good relationship. But he is someone who likes to exaggerate things. All I thought was that, your family was going to stagger through some hard times before stabilizing, and in God's name, all I wanted to do was help in one form, and I am gravely sorry that in attempting to help, I hurt your pride."

Britney looked up and said to Lilly Loveless: "Now, before you ask, my Dad died about five months after my daughter was born. He had cancer, prostate cancer. My Mum is a humble woman without much in terms of a profession, which explains why I've had to rely on aunts and uncles, and others with a little good will to share. But I want no pity and protect my dignity jealously."

"Thanks for sharing your private life with me, which is none of my business, but I suppose we are friends."

Britney nodded about the friendship, and pre-empted Lilly Loveless's next question by saying that Teddy was one of Donald's friends.

She continued with Donald's letter. "Donald also wanted me to send him copies of my birth and other certificates, so he could start the process of procuring residency for me as his wife, to enable me join him in Muzunguland eventually. So when I said I wasn't interested, he wrote something like this: 'Talking about your birth certificate and the idea of acquiring status, I am still lamenting about your feelings on all this. It is true that gold on a pig's nose is not worth a pinch of salt. Yes my badly written letter just soiled all the good intentions I had. And I am really sorry for I can't change the things you thought, your interpretations... But at least I can explain, with the wish that you can understand. What I meant to say was, I wanted to apply for some status or more so, travelling papers through which you can come here as my wife or fiancée... I am sorry I did not really explain this to you. I never meant that you don't have any status now and so I should give you one. That thought of yours really gives me a picture on how low you look at me, like a braggart.'"

"Didn't he threaten to send you whiteman-woman clothes, jewellery, perfumes, lotions or something?" Lilly Loveless's face broadened with a smile at the use of the word 'whiteman-woman'.

"You are a witch, Lilly. A mind reader," said Britney. "You should be doing psychology, so you can qualify as a modern diviner."

"So he did? What did he say?"

"He ended the formal part of the letter, I think, with: 'I still intend to know your dress and shoe sizes. And please don't interpret this like - he thinks I don't have shoes or clothes. Just do it, you can give me a gift, but it doesn't mean I cannot live without it.' Then again, he pleaded for forgiveness: 'Darlin' Brit, forgive me for all, let's be cool with each other. Nothing can convince me that you don't love me still. I know you loved me wholly and truly. And I did love you and I still do, sincerely.'"

"In pencil, he added, I still remember vividly: 'My Darlin' Brit, I wrote this letter some three weeks ago, with the intention of posting it to you in Zintgraffstown. Since I called and was told you have since returned to Puttkamerstown, I thought it might get there when you were away. Anyway, I am feeling very sick at the moment and maybe I would die. But I would like

to first of all ask for your forgiveness and you should know that I loved you dearly. And even at this moment, I still want you to be my wife. If my health fails me, please do me the favour of naming one of your kids after me. Thanks.”

“Sounds like emotional blackmail to me,” said Lilly Loveless.

“It was,” confessed Britney. “And that’s how he came back to the centre of my life, and for some time, my heart was divided between him and Providence, whose patience was, with the benefit of the hindsight I now have, wearing thin. Donald came back home on holidays, and swept me off my feet with promises of heaven and earth, only for communication to dry up between us upon his return to Muzunguland.”

“And what did you do?”

“I wrote him a letter, the contents of which I’m sure you are dying to know.”

“You don’t even have to ask. Tell me,” said Lilly Loveless, excitedly.

“I photocopied it, because this was the most emotional letter I had ever written, and I didn’t want to forget the particular emotions behind writing it.” Britney opened her handbag and took out carefully fold sheets of paper. As she unfolded them, Lilly Loveless asked: “What made you come along with the letter?”

“Don’t tell me you are that forgetful, Lilly,” replied Britney. “Have you forgotten you’ve insisted you wanted to hear my own story? Or have you fallen out of love with love stories? And do I need to guess you are obsessed with detail?”

“I see you read me like a book,” Lilly Loveless smiled her appreciation.

Britney started reading.

“The letter went thus: ‘Donald, my Darling Prince. Greetings! It’s always a pleasure writing to you dear, anywhere and anytime. Did you receive my two letters and my voice message of a certain 14th February left on your answering machine? I hope you did and are still about to reply to them – I am waiting patiently. How says life over there, especially with the kind of stress I have been made to understand you go through to have even the most menial of jobs? Bookwork and a number of jobs can really be backbreaking, courage my dear, success does not come on a gold platter, hope I am not stating the obvious.

“‘Oh what a day, I just thought of picking up my pen and writing to you, hoping you can spare a few minutes to read from me and therefore I am sure you don’t mind my letter at all. Well, I guess not, Fine. And now Donald!! Do you still love the same Darlin’ Brit you used to say you did and repeatedly said so six months ago? Does it ever cross your mind that somebody like her is somewhere millions of kilometres away, who needs to hear from you? If so then have you been so damn busy to at least drop a word of salutation on her behalf, reminding her to hold on tight you still care? Hey boy, do you remember the promise of a second chance? Letting bygones be bygones and things to take a new and promising turn? Do you remember your reunion with a daughter you wanted aborted? Now therefore, tell me, why the hell have you not for the sake of ‘politesse’ sent a note, or a telephone call or even a damn hello through your numerous phone calls to your friends?

“Answer these, is it still the same, or were you just saying all what you said for convenience? Do you still think about me at all? Do you still need me? Do you still even care about me or better still does the name Brit ring any bell at all? I want to believe and hurtingly so, that it does not. For if it did, you would not be so silent for the past six months knowing how much I want to hear from you. Let me know dear, or is my Prince Donald playing the gentleman who is afraid to hurt someone who loves him or do you lack the guts to face me and tell me in no sparing words to go to hell? Oh come on guy, come out with it, and let me know, I will survive don't forget I am always a survivor in life. I want to think that my behaviour towards you while you were here is the cause of this. Are you by any chance still annoyed that I refused to make love with you? Or that I did or did not do something you wanted me to do or not do?

“Stop playing the coward, I know you can do better than that. Tell me boy, give it to me, I will take whatever now than ever before. We better put a full stop to this thing in the name of a relationship if the shit cannot work any longer. Look at it with some keenness once in a while and tell me where we are heading. I mean guy, you came back home, we had a nice time and a nice talk, and you go for months, yes, Donald, six good months and you don't only stay without writing or sending greetings, you don't even reply to my letters, send a quick email, or return my calls. You expect me to believe it's a matter of distance. Yet you are snobbishly silent only towards me. There is so much that is needed in a distant relationship than we have right now; exchange of letters and emails, there is something like phone calls and what have you. I wrote to you and sent my cell phone number, and yet nothing came.

“Think over it please, what am I supposed to think or do if you cherish silence more than any other thing? It surprises me because of what is happening. Damn it Donald, be realistic. I will appreciate it if you pick up your phone one day and tell me or a friend of yours or mine to tell me you still love me or that I should forget about you. It will make more sense than holding on confusedly to this living and partly living sort of relationship. God knows it hurts.

“I know and believe that very soon you would give me an ‘I have been busy baby shit’, tell me you are so busy that you cannot make five minutes out of your tight schedule to drop a few lines to your Darlin' Brit or even a line in-between your conversations with Teddy almost every week. Donald, he tells me you call almost every time when possible and yet you don't even ask him to say hello. Soyon serieux mon cher, ça fait mal. Come to think of it, you even call Teddy on my birthday, and you don't extend as much as a happy birthday. You once said that if we stopped this relationship, I will still be a dear friend. Tell me is this even what friends are for? Behold you cannot even ask Teddy to extend a sign towards me on your behalf? Maybe it holds up to what you once said: Now that you love me so much my love for you is dying. Then tell me.

“Donald, I need somebody, and that person is you, to talk to, to love and to be loved in return. I want to exchange ideas with you, feel loved, and feel wanted despite the distance. Intentionally or not you have made a very significant impact on my life that at times eats up my heart in self pity. I have tried to lie to myself about how much I can ignore my feelings to no avail.

Life will not be the same with you totally out of my scene for you remain in my thoughts and dreams. So please do me a favour, spell things out, I am a big girl and I can with time heal my wounds. Your silence is so hurtful and keeps me worried day and night, day after day.

"These past six months have been hell. I have been watching and waiting for your messages from your friends and brother. Every time I meet Teddy or Willy or Charly, I am always expecting to get a message from you but no, all I get is Donald called. Yes, but we had other important things to discuss and he hung up hurriedly. In the silence of their mouths I can read the words 'but he did not bother to ask about you even on your birthday'. And what about your own daughter, Donald, can't you feel for her? You fled when she was conceived, can't you feel now that she's survived at all odds?

"Obviously Donald, you need to say something and quickly if possible, let me know I have someone who loves me as much as I love you. Tell me if you still want me, if you really need me, and if I am not dreaming, and more especially if I mean anything to you. Things have changed? Remember I will still love you no matter what. Best of luck. Yours, Britney."

"Feelings so strong just can't be wrong, can they?" concluded Britney.

Lilly Loveless opened her handbag for tissues.

Britney was in tears.

Lilly Loveless consoled her best as she could, and encouraged her to forget the bad experiences with Donald.

"I'm thankful for having Providence in my life," said Britney, in-between tears. "I hope that he is not up to anything out there in Muzunguland that would break by heart. As Adapepe would put it, a man is yours when he is on top of you. Out there, he can be anyone's man. On my part, I'm determined not to give in to all the pressures and temptations that come my way. Real life isn't a fairytale, but it's the only option I've got, and I'm determined to make the best of it..."

"Thanks for sharing your story with me, and like I said before, I'm not here to sit in judgment of you or anyone," said Lilly Loveless, embracing Britney.

"You are a friend. You've grown on me, and I feel comfortable with you. You've become like a sister," said Britney, stroking Lilly Loveless' hair. "I'm realizing we may not have much more time together. And I'm wondering what you think of all these stories we've collected."

"What do you mean?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"I mean, you're going to have to write up something about them aren't you? I'm wondering how you think you are going to try to make sense of them."

"Those are good questions, Britney, but a little premature. I see you're becoming a researcher in your own right. I'd actually be interested in what you think of the stories. What should I take back with me?"

"That's a tough one," laughed Britney. "You are really good at wriggling out of questions and sending them back to the questioner, aren't you?"

"There are no right or wrong answers in these things, you know," reassured Lilly Loveless. "Social research is all about collecting perceptions, opinions, views, beliefs and so on, from as many people as possible, which is what you've done so well over the past several months. So the question is,

what would you take home with you from your stories, if you were me?"

"It is difficult to think on my feet, given the mass of data, but a couple of points stand out."

Lilly Loveless was poised to write.

"Marriage is not the same thing to men as it is for women," Began Britney. "Women come into it committed, ready to make sacrifices and literally feeling at the mercy of their husbands who are terribly impatient with independent-minded or questioning women. Men want the benefits of marriage but not the headaches or responsibilities."

"Interesting point," said Lilly Loveless, scribbling away.

"Married or not, men feel helpless without a woman in their lives, as women seem to have the power to bring the best out of any man, a power which of course is often used and abused by men."

"You mean women give men a feeling of self-worth?"

"Yes, and it is thanks to the self control which women have over their own feelings, something lacking in most men. Like new born children men often can't quite express their needs. They may be hungry, but it takes a woman to know that their tantrums and naughtiness are due to hunger."

"Great analogy!"

"It is clear from the stories, at least to me, that as women, we carry in us a resilient pride that has been battered for years. The bulk of men, we have seen, are like greedy monkeys who go for the banana, whether or not they are hungry and regardless of how many they already have."

"Why do you think they do it?"

"Life without a purpose, that's why."

"What do you mean?"

"Life must have a purpose," stressed Britney. "A man must ask himself, 'Am I seeing women, money, power or whatever as an end or as a means to an end.' Those of them who see women, money or power as an end are unlikely to have the same attitude or purpose in life as those who see women, money or power as a means to an end. A man who sees women as a means would certainly not overindulge aimlessly and endlessly, as he is not interested in variety for the sake of variety. In short, a purpose in life means being able to determine our limits, which also means knowing how to pick up again and continue with life's mission even when we fail..."

"That's a very good point, but I don't quite understand," said Lilly Loveless. "Could you explain it again?"

"Simply, what I'm trying to say is that a man without a purpose in life pursues women aimlessly and endlessly. And the same applies for money and power."

"I never would have thought of it that way," said Lilly Loveless. "I take it that this applies to women and their relationship to men, money and power just as well..."

"Absolutely," said Britney. "From my exchange with you, and from the little I know, courtship in Muzunguland doesn't necessarily end in marriage. In Africa, with the exception of tomboys like Adapepe, the only reason for courtship is marriage. Every girl wants to be married. This is what society expects of you, so consumerism, however important, is second to marriage. When one is still young, the pressure to attain this goal is less intense. So high school and university girls can afford to play around with

Mbomas, knowing that they have time ahead of them. It is only when they leave the university and age is no longer on their side that they begin to about settling down and settling for anything. Those who are lucky to have good and well-paying jobs are keen to crown these with marriage. Similarly, flying-shirts, because they are still young and the pressure to marry isn't that acute, are not serious with the girls they meet, even when these girls are serious about love. When we believe the lies they tell us and a pregnancy occurs, they flee. They just want to have fun and move on, an attitude that pushes girls into the material arms of Mbomas."

"That's most insightful," said Lilly Loveless.

"Another point, my last for now, which I would take away from the stories, is not to confuse between sex and love."

"Meaning...?"

"While I may and should indeed have sex with the man I love, I do not necessarily love everyone I have sex with. This means that sex is a lot more common than love, and in many of the cases I have collected for you, sex often serves as a compass, pathfinder, roadmap or passport to love," said Britney.

"Excellent!" said Lilly Loveless. "I'll certainly come back to you for your insights when I start analyzing and interpreting your stories."

"Let me end by sharing with you a poem I wrote a couple of days ago, as I thought about the girls in the stories. It is called M & G."

"M&G? Mbomas & Girls, you mean?"

"Yes, you got it."

"Splendid. I'm all ears."

Britney recited her poem:

Marvellous it is
What the eyes see

Tenderness covers
The touch of the hand

Overwhelmed is the
Heart's desire

Excitement!
Overcomes the body

But watch out!
The heart warns

Think twice
Think deeply...

Warning unheeded
Love wasted
Aimless endless hunger
Fills the heart with anger...

Oh Mommy! How I miss you!!
Now I remember, but too late
Your warnings, advice and visions
Telling all and insisting
Making it clear, I had to watch out
'They will ruin you and get away'

I wish I had listened to you
I did not and I lost you
I lost you to the cold hands,
Those deathly hands that took you,
Took with them my determination
Determination to watch out always
Now I miss you badly Mommy

So badly that I cry over memories
Memories of when I was your girl
On the narrow path of life
You knew only too well

I have lost my way
I know not how, nor where or when
But I will find it
That's a promise.

"Why does the poem start out about a lover and ends up about grieving a dead mother, if I may ask?"

"Because the girl fails to heed her mother's advice, until it is too late, as the mother has since passed on. Now she can only wish she had followed the narrow path her mother never tired of recommending her. But she is determined to repent, to be mommy's sweet little girl once again."

"Thanks for the moving poem," said Lilly Loveless. "I'd like your permission right away to reproduce it in my thesis..."

"Granted," interjected Britney.

"My very final question," Lilly Loveless smiled at Britney who shook her head sceptically upon hearing the words 'very final'. "What would you say were the challenges you faced collecting the stories you shared with me?"

"That's easy," began Britney, giving the impression this was something she had thought over several times.

Lilly Loveless was poised to write.

"The strike was both a blessing and a hurdle," explained Britney. "It made it a lot easier for me to do the research, than would have been possible with normal life at UM. But it also meant that I could only interview those I knew and saw by accident. Even then, a good number of girls took my questions as an intrusion on their privacy and were reluctant to answer in spite of my assurance of confidentiality. So I had to resort to covert research methods, hearsay and congosai as the need arose."

Lilly Loveless looked up.

Reacting to the in her eyes, Britney continued, "I felt guilty having to come back to you with excuses about people being secretive and uptight. But

then, some hearsay or congosai can just not be avoided in something like this, as such relationships are by nature secretive."

Lilly Loveless resumed writing.

"For one thing, I found it extremely difficult to contact married men for interviews. Most of them were too busy for me. Some thought I was a spy and others held back as much as they could. Some were more interested in the researcher – as I often introduced myself, rather presumptuously, I suppose – than in the research. This was a very serious impediment, although one could also see it as further proof of the research. There is also the fact that, since M & G relationships take place mostly under the cover of darkness even in broad daylight, the only Mbomas and Girls I was most likely to interview or hear about, were either that I knew already or those I knew through someone who knew them or their stories.

Lilly Loveless felt and looked reassured.

"I have learnt a lot about research, especially the fact that some things are a lot more difficult to research than others. I now understand the full meaning of what my research methods lecturer at UM means when he says, 'Not all that counts can be counted, not all that can be counted counts.'"

"Could you repeat that, please?" said Lilly Loveless. "I want to write it down exactly as you say it."

"You've taught me to live up to the challenge of doing research on a slippery theme or with elusive people," concluded Britney. "I can't wait to put these skills to use when classes resume at UM. How can I ever thank you enough, Lilly?"

"That's very sweet of you, Britney," said Lilly Loveless, a look of appreciation on her face, "but the honour is mine, the debt as well. I can't begin to tell you how much you've taught me..."

Amanda-Hope is known and respected as the hopelessly hopeful dynamic coordinator for Puttkamerstown of Women against HIV/AIDS in Mimboland (WAHAM). At the University of Mimbo which she frequents, and where she has been invited several times to counsel and to give talks on HIV/AIDS, she is fondly renowned for her no nonsense views. She is a darling of the VC who is known to be very strict and inquisitive on matters related to the private lives of students, and who hates to hear or see young girls going out with married men, having witnessed her twin sister lose two husbands to girls gone wild in the past. Being too deeply suspicious of men herself to have bothered taking one as a husband, the VC did not make a secret of the fact that she hated her sister's wayward mediocre husbands for what happened, and had proceeded to convince her sister never again to soil herself with marriage. She was reportedly revolted when her sister confessed: "My husbands did not treat me like a house with many rooms. They preferred sitting around the veranda without even opening the main door to explore what I really am worth."

The sister's experience only renewed in the VC old wounds of her own bitter disappointment of some 30 years ago, when the only man she came closest to loving, turned out to be a phoney determined to fill her ears with flattery as long as he got the only thing he craved – sex. When she discovered that this terribly determined suitor was married and a father and that his wife was by every standard a beautiful woman, she was stunned and betrayed. Even when he knew she knew the truth, his desire only grew with her unavailability. The last straw came when the 'filthy fellow', in a moment of desperate madness at her office one day, dropped his trousers and exposed his manhood, insinuating that he was doing her a favour, since he thought she was without admirers. Incensed and shamed, she felt tempted to call his wife and tell her, but decided against honouring him with importance he hardly deserved. Instead, she resolved never again to even contemplate wasting her feelings on such dishonest creatures as men. Since then, she has crusaded against married men seeking to prey on innocent girls. As Vice-Chancellor, her body temperature is said to rise meteorically whenever she sees or is made to imagine female students clad in provocative, ever-diminishing little attires that amount to what she calls 'naked dressing'. She prayerfully hates to see female students 'expose secret, sacred and sensual parts of their bodies' in the name of fashion, and is passionately at war against 'men raping girls of their innocence and the joys of womanhood'.

"Girls nowadays dress as if their parents are too poor to afford the cloth tailors need to stitch them decent dresses," Amanda-Hope would agree, rubbing pepper and adding salt to the wound, much to the admiration of the VC. To Amanda-Hope, micro mini-skirts are "no-cross-gutter". All those who accept "condom-skipping fees" or who prefer men with number plates from Sawang and Nyamandem, or who scramble after bushfallers or expatriates they hardly know, let them be warned: "It is true that stolen waters are sweet and bread eaten in secret is good, but you must watch out not to carry 'cam-no-go'. No one forbids you from eating from your beauty, but you mustn't sell your health or sacrifice your studies for filthy money and the company of

men with funny smells. AIDS is serious enough for us to take it seriously. Over 5 million youths are missing education because of AIDS. Join us to fight against it. Proper use of condoms is safe, abstinence is safer. Say No to AIDS by saying Yes to Protection, Fidelity and Abstinence. Get an HIV test – know your status. Let's all bar the way to AIDS." She was omnipresent on campus even when she was absent, thanks to the powerful messages on signposts associated with her.

Lilly Loveless was overjoyed when Amanda-Hope finally agreed to talk to her, not at her office but at Miss World Inn, a sensational and newly opened pleasure spot endowed with beautiful flower gardens, just outside of Puttkamerstown, on the way to Pawa-Town. The prevailing strike had hampered the initial schedule Lilly Loveless had drawn up for her research prior to her arrival in Mimboland. The idea had been to directly interview as many students and staff as possible, but she had ended up relying almost exclusively on Dr Wiseman Lovemore, Bobinga Iroko, Britney, Adapepe, Mrs Lovemore and a few others, incredibly rich though the latter were in social networks and information on goings-on at the university and around town. Every time she got round to actually interviewing someone herself, was therefore always cause to celebrate. It was a Sunday morning, and Amanda-Hope had agreed to have lunch with Lilly Loveless, and then settle down comfortably under one of the huts in the garden for their chat.

Lilly Loveless was already seated at Miss World Inn when Amanda-Hope, fair in complexion and modest in her elaborately and colourfully embroidered Mimboland kaba, arrived in a luxurious Toyota Prado. Lilly Loveless could see it was the project car, from the "Women against HIV/AIDS" inscribed in bold letters on its body.

They ordered their food and drinks, moved tables to a corner where they could talk freely, and started chatting, first on generalities. Lilly Loveless asked Amanda-Hope about her job, the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS in student circles in particular, and the efforts by government, NGOs and other segments of society to curb the pandemic. Amanda-Hope impressed Lilly Loveless with her knowledge on the matter. She said the situation was alarming. There was much campaigning to change behaviour, but old ways die hard. In schools and universities around the country, students were victims of startling insensitivity on the part of men and women, boys and girls, who insisted on going on as if nothing was the matter. Amanda-Hope was particularly concerned with girls, whom she said were more vulnerable to the virus than boys owing to several physiological factors. "There is a female prevalence rate of 11 percent as opposed to 5 percent for males," said she. It was also worrying that the age group of 20-34 years was up to 70 per cent most at risk of contracting the virus and other sexually transmissible infections. Her AIDS work at the university was basically that of sensitisation of students on vulnerability to and prevention of infection with HIV; the impact of AIDS, voluntary counselling and testing, care for the infected and affected.

"There's hope," said Amanda-Hope, "We've come a long way, my critical assessment notwithstanding. Although much remains to be done, one can observe a considerable change of behaviour among young people. They are abstaining and sexual debut is being postponed. They are using condoms with non-regular sex partners while many of them are coming out voluntarily

for counselling and testing," she noted. In addition, the increasing availability of antiretroviral drugs means that fewer persons are dying. I however remind every student I counsel that this does not mean that the virus has been eliminated. It is still there and if we do not continue and maintain the prevention strategies, the virus will continue to circulate and the chain of infection will continue as in a vicious cycle."

"Those are sensible words," said Lilly Loveless. "There's nothing as dangerous as false hope."

"We can't afford to relent in our efforts," agreed Amanda-Hope. "HIV/AIDS is a chronic disease but it's not any chronic disease. If not taken care of, it can wipe out the whole country."

"I understand you are a key advocate for condomisation amongst students. How successful is your campaign in this regard?"

"Yes, I'm a crusader for condoms because they are the next best thing to abstinence," replied Amanda-Hope. "Sex outside marriage has always been a dangerous adventure, but with HIV/AIDS, it has become a thousand times more dangerous. For many students, having sex is a symbol of freedom, and it is irresponsible for us to deny them this freedom or to assume that they wouldn't pursue it simply because we tell them not to. Matters are worsened by the fact that the condom is not without its own problems. Just the other day, a female student confessed: 'I love sex because it is about the only freedom I have. But when I have to use a plastic bag to protect myself, this somehow diminishes my freedom, because there is always the nagging suspicion that the man you are having sex with could be HIV positive. Over time, I've got used to the condom which has become an organic part of my body, thanks to many years of health warnings and safe sex campaigns on radio, TV and billboards. Then, just last week, after a waterfall of pleasure and sensations with a perfect stranger, I realized the condom which he said was of exceedingly high quality had split, spilling its contents into me. I felt miserable, to say the least...' She feared several things all at once, from pregnancy to STDs and HIV... things falling apart. She is receiving counselling as we speak."

Their food arrived. They wished each other bon appétit and ate with pleasure.

"I would like to thank you again for so kindly accepting to talk with me on my research," Lilly Loveless began negotiating the passage from the general to the specific and personal, as soon as they were both through with eating.

Amanda-Hope understood where she was heading: "I understand," said she. "You explained to me on the phone, and I offered to share my story with you, in the hope that you find it useful in your work. I have one condition only. I don't want my voice taped. But you can take notes, as much as you like. Is that clear?"

"That's clear. I have no problem with that. One of the ethical pre-conditions for doing fieldwork is not to use a recorder during an interview without the consent of the interviewee," Lilly Loveless reassured.

That was the reassurance Amanda-Hope needed. "Coeurdelion used to be and remains the man of my dreams, the Mr Right that never was, and never shall be," she began.

Lilly Loveless opened her notebook and started writing.

"He is far away from here and I haven't seen or heard from him for ages, but when it lasted, I would sleep him, dream him and write him irresistible. I would find a reason to contact him by email, SMS, or telephone every day, just to hear his lion-hearted voice. Sometimes I would beep for him to call back, which he did unfailingly, making me feel guilty. Let me take you through my experience with Coeurdelion, in the present tense, which is how I continue to see him," Amanda-Hope looked up for approval.

Lilly Loveless nodded.

"I would ask myself," Amanda-Hope continued, "How come he is always able to call back, SMS or email? I feel a little selfish, especially if I take into account the unholy hours my compulsive urge to reach out to him sometimes makes me SMS or call him. His wife, whom I've never met but whom I respect, is a very beautiful woman and carries herself with a dignity that's out of this world, so it has filtered through to me thanks to my obsessive searches on Google image. I'm attracted to Coeurdelion beyond the sexual, although just the sound of his name turns me on. There's just something about him, something his wife should feel terribly lucky to be the woman to end up enjoying on a daily basis. Marriage is not always accounted for by good looks, so she shouldn't feel that her beauty, which is ten times more than my average looks, qualifies her to have him. Luck must come in somewhere when we talk of marriage. But I do respect her for having the trophy I wish I had. I don't know if you have come across men like him, but every woman would surely know him when they meet one. We talk and dream and hope for Mr Right. To me, he would qualify as the Mr Right of my life," she smiled, her eyes lost in the distance of her imagination.

"Mr Right," echoed Lilly Loveless. "Lucky you! Should I say all is well that starts well?"

"Not necessarily," retorted Amanda-Hope. "I don't know how to tell our story in a coherent manner, but I met him when we went to Nyamandem for a two week long seminar on Social Networking and HIV/AIDS Transmission."

"A meeting organized by Women against HIV/AIDS?"

"Yes, in a way," said Amanda-Hope. "Although to be more exact, it was the First Lady of Mimboland who organized the seminar through her foundation."

"What's the name of the First Lady? And what is her foundation called?" Lilly Loveless wanted every detail, just in case she needed to refer to this particular point in her writing up. Nothing was more frustrating than leaving the field only to realise there were critical gaps in the data collected. She could always rely on Britney to fill her up on missing links, but the more she got right before returning to Muzunguland the better.

"Her name is Supanana, and her foundation is called Fondation Oyéyéyéyéyé."

"What a name for a foundation. What does it mean?"

"It is a form of ululation."

"What for?"

"For the blessings that come with being lucky, I suppose. The land of Mimbo is blessed to have such a formidable couple at the helm of state."

"Thanks. Sorry for the interruption."

"No problem. I know what being a student on fieldwork is," said

Amanda-Hope. "I did something similar when I was working on my Masters in Development Studies at the University of Assieyam in Nyamandem."

"I'm glad you understand," said Lilly Loveless.

Amanda-Hope went back to her story: "Coeurdelion was one of the resource persons for the seminar. His sense of humour combined nicely with his pedagogical prowess and street-wise, common sense, and scientific knowledge of the issues made him stand out as the darling of the participants. Everyone wanted a moment with him, sought to catch his attention. I did the same, although I didn't spend much time in his company. To make matters worse, unfortunately a list of participants and their addresses distributed at the end of the seminar did not contain his details."

"Was he so successful and solicited that he deliberately wanted to keep people from contacting him?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"That was the same question I asked myself then," replied Amanda-Hope. "However, when I returned to Puttkamerstown, I found a way of writing to him an email. I told him how very impressive he was, and how his performance had strangely, made me feel very close to him. He had become like "a sweet dear friend I'm dying to see" and wished that he could just hop onto a bus to see me. I remembered starting the letter with 'My very dear Coeurdelion', which was somehow audacious. Perhaps to feel less embarrassed, I also talked of the other resource persons, singling out the only female amongst them whom I described as 'a sweet lady'."

"Did he reply?" asked Lilly Loveless. She was keen to make Amanda-Hope know that she was listening avidly, as a way of encouraging her to tell her story in as detailed a manner as possible.

"He replied. Didn't say much, but said enough for me to hang onto. So I emailed him back: 'Now I feel better and I'm smiling again,' I told him. Then, talking of him as if he wasn't the friend in question, I added: 'That is a trademark of the dear friend, to put a smile on my face, which this friend does so effortlessly. I prefer to deal with this friend because this person brings out the uninhibited part of me. I feel terribly at ease with this friend, don't feel conscious of what I do or say and I feel as if I've known this friend for a long time.'"

"I bet he wrote volumes in reply," anticipated Lilly Loveless.

Amanda-Hope smiled. "You don't know Coeurdelion," she added. "He is very economical with words, says very little even when emotionally in the brim."

"That doesn't augur well," said Lilly Loveless. "Men who hold back their emotions are not easy to deal with in terms of romance."

Amanda-Hope again smiled. She wasn't going to be pushed by Lilly Loveless and her sense of anticipation to give away her storyline. So she continued: "He replied, not saying much, but saying just enough to keep me going. From my end, the words flowed and flowed, like an open tap: 'Sometimes I end up having lots of 'I wish' thoughts but there is absolutely nothing I can do about that because this dear friend belongs to a darling sweetheart and I belong to a sweetheart too...'"

"This is a funny world but such things do happen," said Lilly Loveless.

"That's exactly how I ended the mail," said Amanda-Hope, looking up. "Are you a mind reader by any chance?"

"No, just Lilly, ordinary Lilly Loveless."

"You've got a good sense of anticipation," said Amanda-Hope. Then she continued: "Communication was regular, by email mainly. SMS was difficult, given that I had a tiny little phone on which it was not very easy to thumb words. I remember sending him an email one morning which read something like this: 'Hi Coeurdelion, Good morning to you and how are you today? I slept well but the sleep was dreamless so this means I didn't get to dream about my dear sweet friend.' He replied: 'What a pity,' which I took as encouragement to write back with anything, my news. So I told him that my husband, regional delegate of tourism, had gone on a two week tour of eco-tourism sites in the various divisions of the region. Soon after sending him the mail, I castigated myself for doing it. Why had I sent him the mail? Was it to let him know that the coast was clear and he could come to visit? It was weird, which only went to show that I was completely smitten by this lion-hearted man I hardly knew."

"I know that feeling, and I know the impulse of subliminal cues as well," said Lilly Loveless, who now had stories enough in her reservoir to know exactly what she was talking about.

"Later in the day, I sent him another email, a long one. It must have read something like this: 'I had a most interesting experience at the gym yesterday. I was feeling rather low, so I decided to get to the gym in the morning, not my usual time of 4:30 - 6pm. The operators were surprised to see me that early. After booking for a 30 minutes massage I decided to go on the treadmill for 30 minutes. After about 10 minutes on the treadmill, one of the muscular youthful instructors came to say hi. I noticed he was visibly glad to see me and the handshake was longer than usual. I ignored that and continued the exercise. At the end of the treadmill regime, I noticed that he was waiting to help me with my stomach exercises which I was grateful for too. About 20 minutes into that, we got talking. He wanted to know why I'd scarcely been to the gym for about 10 days instead of my usual twice or thrice weekly regime. Not wanting to get into small talk, I told him I was taken ill and decided to keep off. I was shocked when this instructor told me that he missed me and had been checking the register to see when I'd sign in. I was amused because I didn't expect that. So I asked him how old he was. He said 22 years. I then told him I'm 30, married with two kids and wondered why he never noticed that I used to come to the gym with my husband most of the time."

"That was great!" said Lilly Loveless, "the sort of answer to send him spinning."

"My new admirer was a bit disappointed but that did not deter him from trying," said Amanda-Hope. "He said that if that is the case, then I must be the envy of most of my mates because I look great and ten years younger. I was flattered but did not blush."

Lilly Loveless looked up when she heard the word blush. It was the first time a Mimbolander was using it as a possibility in their regard, which in this case was understandable, given her fair skin. She made a note of the contextual relevance of words, and how words are like seeds that will only germinate and flourish where the soil was right.

Amanda-Hope continued with the story of her gym encounter: He told me that he loves mature ladies and that he has not been attracted this

much to anybody since he started working in the gym, until now. He even volunteered to make private arrangements for home workout anytime I don't have time to come."

"A dangerous move, if you ask me," commented Lilly Loveless.

"I told him that was not necessary and I reminded him that there are a lot of sweet younger ladies dying to get his attention and that this lady he has his eyes on is definitely not for him. I ended up chatting for up to an hour with him, used words with care so as not to bruise his ego and ended up making him comfortable with me instead of being embarrassed."

"Nice and sensitive of you," said Lilly Loveless.

"I shared this funny yet not so funny experience with Coeurdelion in an email. I think I told him I used to think I was crazy, but never knew that there are crazier people out there trying to pick on lonely looking ladies with supposedly fat purses. This got me thinking: see what Herbert is putting me through by going on tour without me? I really must have looked lost yesterday. At the end of my abridged version of the crazy experience, I asked him what he thought of it, adding 'I hope you are not laughing!'"

"And what did he say?"

"I don't know how exactly he replied, or if he replied at all to this particular mail. Perhaps he never did. Maybe he concluded I was too direct, and decided not to fall into my trap."

"Was it a trap?"

"No, I don't think so, but I do know that if a day passed without me writing to him or hearing his voice on the phone, I would feel terrible. How could a perfect stranger assume such a command over my life? I'd always read in fiction of these kinds of things. Hardly could I imagine something like this happening to me."

"These things happen, and are a lot more common than most of us think, initially, when they happen to us," Lilly Loveless shared her wisdom and privileged knowledge as a researcher.

"Time passed, e-communication flowed, and once in a while a phone call as well, between Coeurdelion and I. One day, a year or so after I first met him at the seminar in Nyamandem, my husband was again on tour, or was he? I can't remember, but he was away all the same. Coeurdelion called and left a message on my cell phone which I had forgotten at home when I went into town to do my hair. So when I got home and called back repeatedly in vain, I went to the cybercafé nearby, and wrote him an email, a copy of which I kept. For some reason, I always CCed myself all mails I sent to him, which is why I printed and brought them along not to give you, but to read out to you."

"I'm grateful," said Lilly Loveless, thinking how much easier it would be for her if Amanda-Hope would simply pass the emails over. But respect for ethics and privacy being of essence in research, she was forced to take copious notes. She imagined what life would be like if she didn't care at all about research ethics: Would her data be necessarily richer? What would people say and do once they found out she had betrayed their confidence? What would fellow scientists call her – an academic vandal, hooligan, fraudster or what? And would she be any happier? Not at all, Lilly Loveless resolved, preferring to play strictly by the rules. Scientific breakthroughs must wait if it takes violation of human dignity, privacy and confidentiality to

attain.

She continued, "The email read:

"Hi Coeurdelion, I hope it is safe to write about this dear sweet friend. He called me this evening but we couldn't get to talk very well. I called back but he was a bit busy, but promised to call tomorrow. I tried sleeping but I could not because I was shaken up. Why? I have a very strong feeling for this dear sweet friend that I can't help it any longer. I've tried so hard to contain it but it keeps overwhelming me. I am so embarrassed because I am not supposed to feel that way.

"He told me to keep him very close to his heart, but he's been there for about a year now, that my heart is threatening to burst. The whole feeling took me by surprise, partly because it is very strong and also of the fact that I am not allowed to feel that way towards another man. The worst part is that this dear sweet friend belongs to a sweetheart, just like me.

"I think about this dear friend every day and smile to his funny jokes. His jokes bring a smile to my face, and I smile anytime I remember him. I look so happy these days that people around me are beginning to notice. They claim that I look very beautiful and I also glow from inside. I glow because I am hopelessly in love with a love that can never be, because I have a love already, likewise him. That is life, sometimes, very tricky. I hope this dear sweet friend will not be embarrassed by this, and will not make fun of this as usual. I feel a lot lighter talking it out, and I am not proud of this."

"How did he react?" Lilly Loveless asked, scribbling away, using both conventional and creative forms of shorthand, as she was determined to miss out on no detail.

"The next day he called to thank me for my mail, stressing how important it was for me to exhale as the best way of controlling my powerful feelings. I don't know what I must have read into his call and words, but later that night I was at the cybercafé again, writing." Amanda-Hope flipped through the bunch of emails, until she found the right one. She had meticulously numbered them with a bold marker.

Amanda-Hope read: "Hi Coeurdelion, guess you will read this mail tomorrow. Can't get to sleep, so decided to write. I've been having problems falling asleep and hope to overcome this soon. Hope my mail is safe with you. Thanks for everything and thanks for understanding how pertinent it is for me to exhale. I was almost going crazy. You know I met you a little over a year ago. I met a very funny man that impressed me with his humour and command of issues. I was almost disappointed when I realized that many other women at that seminar were fascinated by the person I have come to call my dear sweet friend. The whole thing was so funny but instead of getting pissed off, I wanted to get to know him more, so I found myself looking out for him during lunch breaks.

"When I got back to Puttkamerstown, I wanted to contact my funny friend but realised that I hadn't your email so I decided to check that out on Google. I wrote to you because I wanted to tell you something special about you which most people take for granted – the fact that you are naturally a happy person. I also found myself writing and looking out for those magic mails from you that make my day. I grew very fond of you and the mails spilled from every other day to weekly and then to almost daily. I tried so hard to stop writing but I couldn't. When you kept replying, I was happy and

also thought that you were just being polite. I also noticed that I started thinking about you a lot, a feeling I tried very very hard to ignore because it was very embarrassing.

"My perception of the feeling changed dramatically when I stumbled on a song by Celine Dion which goes like this – I'm scared, so afraid to tell you I care, will he find me weak, love can be so cruel, I don't know what to do. I was so disturbed and I was a bit absentminded for days, which Herbert noticed but could not get to know the cause of my withdrawn state. I was really ashamed of myself and of falling in love with a love that I can never have. I was so scared that I sometimes asked Herbert if I talked in my sleep, for fear of calling out your name in my sleep, and he assured me that I didn't.

"I tried several times to relay how I felt in my mails, but was really scared to make it obvious, while you continued to make fun of the whole situation. I tried very hard to forget, but it was impossible. This dramatic turn came after my experience with the gym attendant, whom I tried so hard to console after his confession. Unfortunately I have even bigger problems eating me up with no soul to talk to and probably nobody to understand. So I decided to be bold, bail myself from the misery and talk to you, perhaps you will understand. I had to take that decision because I was sick and shaken up inside. I was not physically sick, but never realised that emotional sickness could be that strong.

"I love Herbert and respect him a lot, but when I met him the feeling was not all consuming as this. I'm not angry with you for this, rather I feel really happy for having the opportunity of experiencing such deep and intense feelings about someone, unfortunately at the wrong time. Somehow, I did not expect you to feel something more than a mere affection for me, but was really surprised and touched when you told me that you felt the same way too. I still wonder why we allowed ourselves to fall into this mess. Hope that time will take care of us. Sorry I had to write this so long a letter. I still can't get to sleep. Maybe I will read for an hour or so. Sweet dreams. Amanda-Hope."

"Wow!" exclaimed Lilly Loveless. "Very moving."

"Until these two letters, I had written to him from my normal email account, where the closest I came to something like these letters was when I wrote to him teasingly: 'Once in a while I have some naughty thoughts. Last night I found myself wondering If you are circumcised or not (don't scream), and trying to visualise how big you are (don't scream), though you tried to convince me this morning that you are very big, I could feel that and I actually came but was very embarrassed to tell you when you asked. I also visualized them in my mouth too (don't scream). Coeurdelion, we are both crazy. I know I will be very shy to look straight in your eyes when next we meet because of this crazy stuff. I've never been this crazy before. Maybe in the near future, we may get to meet somewhere. Maybe at another seminar where other participants should be strangers, so we can have the whole time to ourselves. I would love that very much and I know you can identify that kind of opportunity much easier than I ever could. Just send me a flyer if you know that you will be there and that I'm also qualified to attend. Anything on Gender, HIV/AIDS and/or Development would suit me fine. Now I'm being very forward. Sorry about that. Please delete this mail.'"

"You cannot always count on them to do as you bid," said Lilly

Loveless, thinking of her own personal headaches in this regard. "What did he say?" The story was getting more and more interesting, and Lilly Loveless was doing her level best to follow and write at the same time. She was writing so hard that she feared she might develop blisters on her fingers.

"When he received my two mails, he advised me to open another email account on which we could exchange freely on the matter. He obviously did not want any of our mails to be intercepted. So he replied to me through the new account, which was the first and last email I read from him that was longer than a few words or lines. I have stored this mail and have read it several times that I can recite it like my favourite passages of the Bible.

"He wrote: 'Dear Amanda-Hope, many thanks for both mails. I'm glad you opened this address so we could speak openly, and hopefully, talk you out of this intense emotion. I feel flattered that you find me attractive, and as I have also indicated, I do find you attractive. But this does not mean that it should necessarily lead to anything intimate, anything beyond a very good friendship. I am married and you are married. I respect my wife very much and so do you your husband Herbert, who after careful investigation, happens to be a very good friend to a very close colleague of mine. I can never do anything to hurt him, just as I can't do anything to hurt my wife – at least not with you as the wife of a dear friend to a close friend.

"Now that you have aired yourself out, I respect you all the more for it. Please do not feel embarrassed about your feelings, but put them in perspective. These things happen, but what would the world be if we were taken over by everything that happens? I shall always respect you as a friend, and indeed, shall do everything to encourage you in your interests and all, but I want it to end at that. So please kindly keep things in check, knowing that you've got a very good friend in me. This is not meant to break your heart, but rather to stop things growing out of hand. Have a great day. Coeurdalion, your friend.'

"His response was not what I expected."

"It was callous, insensitive, to say the least," Lilly Loveless agreed.

"I was devastated."

"I can imagine."

"I wrote, I called and I sent SMS to him, partly apologising and partly angry."

"Apologised? What for...?"

"When I noticed impatience in his voice, I sounded very stupid and confused. Of course, it left me with a bruised ego and a stronger determination to get back to normal. I called because I wanted to explain a particular decision I had to take, which was to stop calling him for sometime because I realised I got excited anytime I heard his infectious voice and laugh, and this made nonsense of my effort to put an end to my unhealthy feelings. Then I blamed him as well. Maybe we got very close, open and trusting in our mails and phone calls that the emotional aspects of it came naturally; maybe we got a bit carried away. I understood his call for a more neutral relationship, but it was perhaps the abruptness that had unsettled me."

"That was very gracious of you," said Lilly Loveless.

"It is not as if my two emails were entirely from the blue. No! He used to tease me in his emails, SMS and phone calls, leading me on as it were."

"That's why I think you let him off too easily by even suggesting that you were to blame. You should not have apologised. You should..." Lilly Loveless was, all of a sudden, really heated up.

Amanda-Hope appreciated the sisterly solidarity and looked in her repertoire for further evidence to prove the point. "Often, he would call or SMS me at most unusual hours, especially when he knew that Herbert was not around. I remember emailing him following one such phone call: 'Hello dear Coeurdelion, I wrote. It was nice of you to wake me up this morning and your request was out of the blue. I loved it very much, though I was surprised initially. I still feel warm inside. I hope you are alright now, is it still hard? This mail sounds terrible and raw. I always wonder why we are terribly attracted to each other in spite of everything, what is wrong with us? I can never get tired of asking that. Two nights ago, I couldn't sleep because of some naughty thoughts I had. Remember I sent you a text message that night. Anyway since we can't have each other, our dreams are always there to manipulate things. I feel warm anytime I think of you because I visualise you as a friend and a lover. Take care. I will write the second and third mail now and hopefully, you will get to forgive me.'"

"Forgive you? What for?" Lilly Loveless was still perplexed Amanda-Hope should keep apologising and asking for forgiveness.

"I had done something he didn't like, and he had asked me to write three emails to him to earn his forgiveness."

"Sounds like someone who got a kick out of emails," said Lilly Loveless.

Amanda-Hope did not comment, but carried on: "He even used to think of me on important feast days. He would call or email, to leave a message wishing me well. That was the case one Christmas day or was it Valentine's Day? I had neglected checking my mail, because I didn't expect he would write, just to be proved wrong. When I discovered he had written, my joy was over the top. I was even happier when he called, so I wrote to tell him how much his little gestures meant to me."

Amanda-Hope sorted the mails until she found the one in question. It read:

"'Hello Coeurdelion,' I wrote. 'Talking to you today was really nice. We seem to always have something to talk about, and very comfortable talking about everything too. Your friendship means more than you can ever guess. Thanks! Hope you will reply. This email address has been inactive for sometime. Have a nice day today. I didn't check my mail on Valentine's day because I thought that my dear sweet friend is somewhere, probably busy with friends and loved ones to give me a thought, but I was wrong. I accidentally opened my mail the day after to find a most beautiful mail and most beautiful thoughts for Valentine and always. Thanks!!!. Sure my day will be happy, you do spring me up with your mails and calls. Still don't understand why, but sure happy about that. May your year be filled with joy and laughter.'"

"He was leading you on all along," said Lilly Loveless. "And to turn around and try to wriggle himself out completely, is totally irresponsible and unfair."

"I can even swear that once before, things had reached such a crescendo that I found myself writing things that could only have been felt

and shared by the both of us," Amanda-Hope agreed. "Otherwise, how would you situate a mail like this one: 'Although I will die of guilt if I attempt it, the simple truth is that I want you very much and I want to make love to you. I hope this is not too much for you to swallow, but that is how I feel. Since you promise to keep my secrets with you, I sincerely hope that this huge confession will go to the deepest part of your heart.' The email was written shortly after a call towards the end of which I was actually devastated. I could not explain what came over me. My body started shaking and I cried my eyes out without knowing why. I told him: 'You know we are both happily married and want to remain that way, but wanting another, even for a brief moment is what I can't understand.' I cried because I was confused. I love my husband very much, he loves his wife very much and I love him very much. I asked myself repeatedly: Does this make sense? Since we promised to remain friends, maybe with time I will get over this. I hope sooner than later, before we hurt ourselves."

"And how did things evolve from there?" Lilly Loveless was curiosity personified.

"The relationship was never meant to be," said Amanda-Hope, "at least, not in the sense that I might have hoped. The tap of the water of life I had aspired to and dreamt about in fear dried up, all of a sudden. No longer would he answer my calls or reply to the mails and SMS I sent him. I clearly remember the last mail I sent, a mail which he ignored like all the others, and since which he has not been in touch, except, of course, in my dreams."

"You continue to dream about him?"

"Oh yes, big time. I look forward to my dreams the same way others look forward to their emails and phone calls."

Amanda-Hope read out the mail, her voice slow and deliberate, as if to reconstitute the emotion that provoked its initial composition: 'Hello my dear sweet friend,' she read, 'Have I said thank you for being a sweet friend lately? Don't think so. Thank you so much for being you and for your ready smiles, spontaneous and uncensored calls, and chat, and for being very original. Very few people are like you, believe that. No hang-ups, not even trying to act polished, not even thinking of what people might think for being you and being playful. You are a darling. Why am I writing such mail to you, you might wonder? I don't really know, just out of sincere appreciation for you and your friendship, perhaps. By the way, you were drinking red wine in my dreams last night. I wonder what the celebration is? And you were very happy too. Anything good? Care to share?'"

"You really were swept off your feet by this man, weren't you?"

"Like you said before, these things happen."

"Yes, they do."

"In brief, that is my story with Coeurdelion, the affair that never was. Otherwise, I'm very happy with Herbert, my darling husband. Once in a while, I try to push him to do with me the things I have only dreamt doing with Coeurdelion. One day I had this funny experience with my husband..."

"What? Please tell."

"I looked at Herbert lovingly and said 'talk to me'.

"He looked surprised, 'I am talking', he replied.

"Not in that way, I want you to talk to me raw and hard, as if you are making love to me, or as if you were talking to a perfect stranger out there

you'd just met.'

"If it is to just talk to you, no problem, but to talk raw and hard, that is a different matter altogether. I'm not cut out for that.'

"Just give it a try, you may like it.'

"No, I don't think so. I'm too old to act stupid.'

"The problem is that you are too self-conscious and too uptight, it will do you a lot of good to loosen up and act differently once in a while.'

"Herbert kept quiet and looked at me suspiciously.

"OK, let me teach you how to talk hard and raw to a woman.'

"OK, I'm listening,' said Herbert, still looking embarrassed.

"Just close your eyes and pretend you are alone with me. What are you doing now? I want you to place your hand on my shoulders to draw me closer to you so that my breast can sink into your chest like the quills of a porcupine injecting pleasure not pain. I want you to feel the softness of my breath and the softness of my lips. I want to sit sideways on your lap, to feel you going inside me, growing bigger and bigger as you explore the fullness of the colonial territory of which you are governor general...'

"Herbert cut in, 'I think you've gone crazy. I better get the doctor here fast.'

"Never mind the doctor. I think we are all crazy, but we all end up pretending we are not. But sometimes we wonder what goes on behind closed doors. Remember Fela Kuti's *Na Poi*, your favourite music when we first met and you were still wooing and tantalizing me with your creative imagination? Whatever happened to those days of spontaneity and unpredictability?'

"Count me out of that crazy stunt,' Herbert snaps.

"My friend, relax. I know you love the real thing, how come you find it very difficult to imagine it and be naughty, even for a second? I told you to think for a moment that you were with a perfect stranger who has just caught your fancy, and whom you are determined to do all to have...'

"Hmm, is that what you do when I travel? When I'm on mission? Next time you're coming with me. I'll ask my mom to come and stay with the children. I just can't sit by and watch you get any crazier.'

"Never mind, my friend. It's not what you think. Anyway, it's a free world. It's good you don't know what goes on in my mind.'

"I think you're either watching too many blue movies or that somebody is putting ideas in your mind. It will be interesting to know what goes on in your mind.'

"That is not possible, my friend, not in the way you are going about it. Just relax and go to sleep.'

"I wished Herbert goodnight, kissed him and turned to the other side of the bed with a mischievous smile, but with Coeurdelion on my mind, actively present in his absence."

"That's amazingly creative," said Lilly Loveless. "You've got a most fertile mind."

"At the end of the day, Herbert has been and remains my darling husband. You know, when I was about to marry him 15 years ago, my parents objected to the idea."

"Why?"

"Because they could not comprehend why I should pick a 'hungry

looking' young man, straight from the university, over dozens of others – 'money miss roads' struggling to convince my parents with expensive gifts and sweet talk."

"So why did you choose him over all the other guys with money?"

"Somehow, I don't know at what point I realised that money is not everything, but thank God I did before it got too late. I would have been a very unhappy person if I had married any of them. I still stumble on them, once in a while. Some even go to the extent of buying stupid gifts for my children. The bottom line is that I don't envy them or their wives. I really wish them and their narrow attitude to love and marriage, all the luck."

Even before Lilly Loveless could thank her for a rich and insightful meeting and for so graciously making herself available despite her many duties, Amanda-Hope stood up.

"Sorry, I have to go," said she. "Sunday afternoons are very busy for us women here in Puttkamerstown. There're lots of meetings to attend, people to see, and activities to plan for the week. I wish you well with your research, and do call if you need any more information."

She rushed to her car and drove off, leaving Lilly Loveless behind to change into a cute flowery light-red bikini and savour the inviting, newly constructed swimming pool.

The strike has been raging on for over five months. Bobinga Iroko and *The Talking Drum* have termed it the longest ever in Mimboland. Lilly Loveless does not remember ever reading of a strike as long as this in the history of Muzunguland. Clashes have multiplied between students determined to assemble and to express themselves, and the police determined to enforce an order banning public gatherings. The casualties have been enormous. Students have been killed. Others shot and wounded, brutalized and hospitalized. Female students have been raped with relentless brutality. The student leadership blames the police, gendarmes and soldiers, who in turn blame the students and the West Mimboland Liberation Movement (WMLM), which they believe has infiltrated the University of Mimbo and school campuses throughout West Mimboland. The WMLM, which believes in the value of West Mimboland traditions and in the power to create, affirm, live, value, and promote qualitative difference, is said to scare stiff President Longstays' regime. More students and unidentified persons have been rounded up with relish by the police, convinced as they are that a lady gendarme was stripped naked, raped and dragged along the streets by rapacious students, to the applause of an uproarious crowd of delinquents who have pledged to make nonsense of the university authorities and their great ambitions.

Dr Wiseman Lovemore and other detained lecturers have now been accused, but still not formally charged, of being the brains behind the movement and the strike. They are said to question the current boundaries of the United Republic of Mimboland: Why did President Longstay and his supporters insist on putting together what God and the colonizing Muzungulanders have always wanted asunder? President Longstay, who is believed to be always right even in his kingly new clothes, is said to be particularly rattled by this treasonable conduct. Instructions have been dispatched to ensure that the traitors are brought before him, and imprisoned next door to his almighty office, under the special oversight of the republican rottweilers of his Maximum Security Prison in Nyamandem.

With the active assistance of the VC, the state has flexed its almighty muscle on all those "nurturing a culture of lawlessness" at the University of Mimbo. In her most recent riposte, the VC has hit out at reckless vandalism by students, rumour mongering and back stabbing by post-seeking members of staff ready to kill to be appointed, and the disappointing sense of ingratitude she gets from all those for whom the university has done so much. She concludes, fuming with the anger of one born to be right: "Persons come and go, but institutions remain," pointing an accusing finger at the university staff union which she believes has always been hostile in its preference for hooligans over refined, disciplined minds. "I refuse to bend over backwards to pat on the back people who mean no good. How can they criticize and run down the regime with such alacrity and impunity? How dare they seek to bite the finger that feeds them?"

No sooner was the VC's statement released than the rottweilers of the regime were summoned to act. According to Bobinga Iroko and *The Talking Drum*, Dr Wiseman Lovemore and his purportedly guilty colleagues of the

staff union and a good number of allegedly subversive students were secretly transferred by night from Puttkamerstown to Nyamandem just hours after the statement by the VC was read on radio. No one knows for sure what their charges are, and when *The Talking Drum* dared to report on it, the active ears and eyes of the state in Puttkamerstown dilated with rage, raiding kiosks, vendors and the offices of the newspaper, seizing and burning every copy they could find. "That's how they vandalise our souls, rape our hearts and inflame our dreams," wept Bobinga Iroko. "Theirs is the argument of force, and not the force of argument. But we are determined, one and all, to die fighting for our heritage and right to dignity." He pledged: "*The Talking Drum* must continue to inspire the weak and the defenceless of West Mimboland."

The atmosphere is very tense, and Bobinga Iroko and his fellow journalists have sent out emails, SMS, faxes and letters drawing the attention of the diplomatic community and the outside world to the excesses and impunities of Longstay and his government. They are waiting, desperately, for signs of hope. But danger lurks in the air for Bobinga Iroko. A couple of days ago, he renewed Lilly Loveless's fear for his safety when he told her how someone high up in the corridors of power, a college friend, warned him. "Iroko! Iroko! Iroko!" the man called his name on the phone and said: "How many times did I call you?" "Three times," replied Bobinga Iroko. And the man told him: "Tradition, religion and even common sense tells us that once a person's name is mentioned three times, it means that it is a serious business, or that the person is in big trouble." When Bobinga Iroko asked him to explain what he meant, he said: "A word to the wise is enough," and dropped the phone before Bobinga Iroko could tell him: "The fowl that feasts on the intestine of another should know its turn is next."

Bobinga Iroko is stubborn in his determination to fight until Dr Wiseman Lovemore and all those who have been detained without trial and now illegally transferred to the regime's notorious maximum security prison in Nyamandem are released. He has planned a journey of protest to Nyamandem in the coming weeks and Lilly Loveless has offered to accompany him.

As for Desire, Lilly Loveless' landlady, five months without teaching and having to worry about university committees and the dictatorship of the central administration, have given her a singular opportunity to organize and attend to her personal affairs. She has been on and off from Puttkamerstown, and Lilly Loveless can't believe her luck to be finally able to talk with her in depth, and especially to interview her about her experiences with love and loving.

"These visits to my home village have been simply brilliant," Desire tells her. "Until the strike, I truly had no idea how packed full of stress I was. Now that I've actually relaxed, it feels really good... Wow. I do not remember feeling this good in ages. Going to the village and relaxing in between meeting my folks have been everything that I could have asked for."

"I can see you badly needed a holiday," Lilly Loveless agreed. "I know how stressful teaching can be, having served as a graduate assistant myself."

"I know what you mean," said Desire. "Assisting or teaching from the bottom is not always easy. All the donkey work gets dumped on you. At the university, being just a mere lecturer, my days are long and hectic, so are

my weeks. When things are normal, my days and weeks there melt into the next to such an extent that I keep becoming confused as to whether it's this or that month, if it's the end of the month or the beginning."

"You must have a lot on your plate," empathised Lilly Loveless.

"Yes, so many things, I tell you," Desire agreed. "You know we are terribly poorly paid and heavily overworked at the university. So, in addition to slaving away, under-resourcedly teaching students who don't really want to learn but who are all keen to graduate, one must think of other ways of making ends meet."

"So what else do you do?"

"Consultancies, of course. There are lots of NGOs interested in poaching our brains for a fee, and a good fee for that, compared to the miserly salaries we are paid by the state."

It wasn't exactly consultancies or hardships at the university that Lilly Loveless wanted to hear about Desire, but she had to give the impression of being interested for the sake of the interview. So she listened on, as Desire expressed her frustrations with her life as a lecturer, and the catalogue of things she did to make ends meet at the margins. When Desire finally got round to addressing the theme of love, Lilly Loveless was so relieved that she interrupted as little as possible, afraid as she was, to derail Desire with interjections.

So Desire told her story like someone giving a lecture on a theme she knew well:

In an ideal world, love should be about companionship, deep and multifaceted connections between two individuals beyond sexual attraction. It is mutually satisfying. To use a commonly used, perhaps confusing, word: chemistry – there must be chemistry between the two people. The individuals are concerned about each other. They derive satisfaction from giving and receiving pleasure to and from each other. Love is about openness, honesty and mutual support, whatever the demands or situation. Ideally, this kind of relationship is so satisfying that both parties should be content. They seek to protect the status quo and improve on it if possible.

However, Desire finds that in reality, this does not exist. People get into relationships as some kind of extractive industry in which one grabs whatever is available from the other party and gives very little in return. It is obviously harmful to its victims, those from whom stuff or essence is extracted. Being at the receiving end of such relationships, and observing others, has made Desire a cynic.

In these relationships, honesty goes out the window. To tell one's partner the truth about oneself is to end the relationship on the spot. Otherwise the truth leads to one being stereotyped.

Desire also knows that for women, at least in the cultural setting of Mimboland with which she is familiar, pretence, lies and manipulation are the way to a permanent relationship. "They lie about what they want, pretend that they are OK with shoddy sex – claiming that it is the best in the world – and manipulate men into a corner where they are made to do the women's bidding. This is done through mind games, herbs in food or as pessaries to tighten, warm or dry their womanhood or the body."

Desire finds it stupid if not downright harmful. Besides it is too much effort pursuing shadows because often what men really want is not

communicated.

If her Mimboland brothers want tight womanhoods, Desire would rather have women exercise their pelvic muscles than add abrasives into their passageways.

That sadly is the reality.

Those not able to play what she terms "the game of manipulations and bits of pounded vegetative matter here and there" are left for being difficult, impossible, etc. She remarks, "I guess the herbs work! For me, it is not love when the other party is forced or otherwise manipulated to do what he would rather not do."

Her theory on cheating between lovers is simple: "It is because partners' needs are not known and catered for that people cheat on each other. Mutual suspicion thrives unchecked. Tension if not open conflict is the order of the day."

Desire also thinks love as defined or described is equally determined by socio-cultural settings. She says in her cultural setting, women cannot express their emotional and/or sexual needs if they want to stay in a relationship long term. "To be seen as decent women or 'wife material' women have to make do with 30 second sex sprints and fly pasts. Its about accepting that very little is so much, that a bite size snack is a feast, that a fraction of a minute is all that. Not only are most men unable to improvise when or if they realize that the meal is understood as an inadequate and cheap street snack desperately pretending to be an exquisite feast, many do not seem to know what else to do."

Desire says she knows so because of stories she hears from other women. Stories which are both bizarre and entertaining, but speak to frustration which understandably sends some women to adultery. Stories of women sitting in a tub of warm water, not that she understands how this works, to make something of the puny offering; women who use their fingers, vibrators, horse riding, fantasies, suggestive language, etc.

To Desire, the fact that most men still find this laughable because without a phallus women's sexual pleasure is doomed as far as they are concerned, is laughable. "They are damn wrong", she says.

According to Desire, "women in the whole range of woman-to-woman sex, where women pleasure each other are also seen as child's play, not the real thing." After all, when two women are together what can they possibly do, people wonder? Men laugh them off in general, especially those who shop around for substitutes or alternatives that are obviously mimics of the male phallus which has fallen out of favour with them.

It makes her wonder what the fuss is about given the sorry state of affairs in many a heterosexual relationship. The reason why these things are not easy to communicate is, she thinks, lack of openness and honesty in relationships. If women say it like it is, it is tantamount to saying to a man that his lineage is full of man-eating beasts. It's an insult which most men cannot live with.

Desire thinks it is better not to be in a relationship when the pickings are this complicated. Who needs the constant threat of insanity?

To her, some women choose to marry for image and status. They deal with relationship shortfalls through other creative means. Besides, marriage enables one to raise children 'decently'. On the children front, she realizes

that maybe not being in a relationship is a disadvantage. However, it is also too much of a sacrifice to live with a man who could be defined as a torturer, Abu Ghraib-style; getting a woman sexually excited and expectant and leaving her in suspense day after day for the sake of children. In that situation, she thinks she would die or do something outrageous.

Of course, churches, she says, tell women to tame their desire which in some cases is described as demonic. It's always a woman's problem, is it not? Other women also go to church to 'tame' the flesh. This, to her, shows that women sometimes have no vocabulary or safe space to express these issues. No one allows them to explicitly tell men. After all, women are not supposed to be sexual beings beyond wifing, mothering and babysitting men. As for single mothers, they should attribute their state of affairs to some wayward men who 'spoiled' them and left without taking responsibility. Not always true.

Desire sincerely believes that if there was a way for men and women to truly satisfy each other, people would not philander. She imagines that the pleasure of truly satisfying and being satisfied by one's partner would be enough for people to stay faithful.

She admits there is the question of variety. But depending on the type of variety sought, even then she thinks this should be a matter of mutual agreement.

She imagines that if she was in a relationship in which she was aware that her partner desires other experiences that she is unable to offer, that in his pursuit of these pleasures he would be safe for both their sakes, and was assured that he would not forget his obligations to her, she does not see why she would not let him explore his needs elsewhere.

She also knows that there are many instances where these arrangements are entered into between men and women in long-term relationships. The point for her is that these pleasures, needs and pursuits should be communicated openly. As a partner she should also have the right to agree or decline to partake in them.

In reality this does not happen.

As Desire says, studies show that in many instances, men marry the women they do not like to be with, but like to be with women they cannot marry. This is a contradiction because, for some reason, men cannot demand or negotiate some of their desires in so-called permanent relations, for some reason. It is as if these relations are so sacred that only certain forms of pleasure can be pursued in them. Other pleasures pollute marriage or otherwise devalue it. On the other hand, pleasures pursued outside marriage, though appreciated, somehow devalue partners who provide them, making the women unmarriageable. "I guess this is why some wise women repackage themselves and sanitize their pasts for marriage. This precludes certain pursuits which the women themselves may fancy. This makes relationships a smoke and mirrors game of lies, manipulation, deceit and more."

Finally, Desire thinks that love, as defined, allows partners to be whoever they want to be. There is room for 'comfortable silence' because they are content. She explains: "What I mean is that at any given time, it should be acceptable for one of them to read the Bible while the other surfs a porn site." There should be no tension or sense of threat because there is agreement about what the relationship is and is not about. Where common interests lie

and where they diverge. The point of divergence needs not be a source of conflict but room for each partner to have personal space.

Yes, imagine that coupledness can be stifling, especially where there is an expectation that two grown up individuals have to be together, do things together, eat together, sleep together, etc., for years and years. She would find that stifling. So there should be room for either party to take off and recharge their batteries alone somewhere without the feeling that such action is a sign of rejection, a threat to coupledness.

"I personally withdraw to music and reading, both light and heavy. If I was in a relationship, I would hate a situation where these personal pleasures are rendered anti-social simply because I am in a relationship. I know that sometimes this happens especially to women."

Personal space for women is taken up by entertaining, housekeeping, man keeping, etc. This, to Desire, kills the human spirit. Time alone, once a week or more often, if possible, engrossed in these anti-social pursuits, revitalizes a woman. Even when not in a relationship, when there are other people in the house, she finds sometimes she wants to be alone, in a corner somewhere. So she spends time in her study or bedroom watching a movie, reading and/or listening to some music. It makes her reconnect with herself, an important prerequisite to connecting with other people, she believes.

Psychologists also say so. People who have no personal pursuits are given to resentment, especially towards people they should love. In fact, they begin to look at them as extracting essence from them and giving none.

Yet, sometimes one gives herself some zest by creating 'me-time'. Sometimes she feels this is why women nag, demand so much and are given to whinge fests or resort to retail therapy which in some cases is seen as frittering away the man's money to get even, where the man brings the bulk of the bread away and beacon. Spending/consumption to Desire is a way of restoring lost value, alienation, loss of identity, etc. It is also a way of getting men's attention with clothes, perfumes and hairstyles. The point is: why can't men's attention be obtained without these props?

Desire concludes: When all is said and done, these are thoughts of a woman who is not so knowledgeable in these things especially how they are done in practice. A woman who is a million times unlucky in love or has not learnt the script well enough to live it.

"As a single person," Desire reckons, "I am obviously not so knowledgeable about some of the benefits of sacrifices of men and women to make unworkable relationships work. Maybe because I come from a society that willingly or otherwise decided two generations ago that initiation of its youths is no longer necessary, many of us grow up without compasses so we go from one mistake to the next; learn on our hooves while trotting to unknown destinations in our lives. Who knows whether or not what we learn is worthwhile? All I know is it is a jungle out there. There are many predators and carrion eaters to clear off the walking wounded or any bits which the big predators could bother to reach. One has to be smart enough to either stay out of harm's way or out to get precisely and only what she wants. As one Internet joke says about women's dating these days, 'why get a whole pig when all you want is a 60g sausage?' The word play is intended, of course.

"One could say changing dating habits results from as well as points to the streamlining and standardisation of life. In Muzunguland, people work

for 11 months and take a vacation to a place with sun and sand to look for sex. In other words, it's a tidy, compartmentalized life which on the one hand acknowledges that love is hard to get, but on the other sex can be mixed with relaxation to create a storybook romance. What can be read into this is a sense of sex as the only thing people cannot meaningfully do on their own. Never mind sex toys, technology and cyberspace. Even this challenges the whole idea of love: relationships, are they possible, necessary, or are our lives such that people can do without most of the frothy, messy bits, except perhaps that one thing? People do not like to 'waste' time on low return activities. So the precision that goes with streamlined, standardized and routinised lives leads people to getting the sausage and bugger the pig. However isn't romance perhaps about cooing/fussing about the pig while getting the sausage? On the other hand, who really cares? Is love so important? Is it not subjective? If some pursue sausages and are happy with them and others want the whole pig, who is to say who is better or worse than the other? Wrestling the pig for the sausage has its fun bits, but, boy oh boy, the dirt, stench and bruises linger afterwards. So love is complex. I think it has no formulae. Sometimes it is found outside convention. Sometimes it defies understanding to those watching on the sidelines. Still, it is an important human condition which we all need. People get in and out of relationships in search of it."

At the only conference Desire has ever attended outside Mimboland, she learned something about love and power amongst women that she had not known before, something strange but understandable. The meeting was on Global Feminist Citizenship, and she had been invited because of a paper she had done titled "'She goes to bed dressed like a football coach': Sexual Strikes and Stringency by Mimboland Women during Political Upheavals". This paper had somehow found its way to the Internet, and was said to be used by leading feminists of the globe as evidence that even in Africa beneath every compliant woman is a latent feminist citizen of the globe.

So there she was, at this all important meeting, rubbing shoulders with the cream of the cream in women's interests.

"The beauty of being a Lilliputian is that sometimes people ask one to do things because one is harmless," Desire explained. "I could never kill a fly on the wall, honestly, not even if the fly was dead already...."

"Any thoughts on pornography?" asked Lilly Loveless, not wanting Desire to stop talking."

"Pornography?" Desire was taken by surprise.

"My study has no taboo subjects, and pornography being one of the arenas where consumerism and power are played out through the commodification of sex, I would like to know your thoughts on the phenomenon," Lilly Loveless read verbatim from her research proposal, as is afraid not to mention a word out of turn or place.

"For me this is complex," smiled Desire, hesitantly.

"Try," insisted Lilly Loveless. "I just want your thoughts, any thoughts. There are no right or wrong thoughts on the matter."

"You sure are persuasive."

Lilly Loveless smiled alluringly.

"OK, I'll try. Let me warn you upfront that I'm thinking on my feet, as I haven't reflected on the matter before."

"I like it when you think on your feet."

"The point is what kind of porn is it... Is it hardcore or soft porn?"

"What is the difference for you?"

"One is like watching Jerry Springer, the other like Oprah Winfrey."

"That's good! Beautiful! Can I quote this?"

"Yes, you can," Desire said and continued with her reflections on the matter: "Porn would be fine if the script was not about violence, dominance and abuse. I do not understand humans' addiction to pain and discomfort. When I think of porn, I see it as make-believe in which men are invariably conquerors with their gigantic penises and unending erections. I see it as an expression of certain forms of masculinity where putting down women is key, where power is about conquering, occupying, penetrating, and pinning down a woman.... Men love to occupy territory...women are of course part of the territory.... Where this does not happen some of the female performers are drugged to create the illusion of being so horny, needy or having the mother of all climaxes. What we should question are some niches in these performances where for instance there are double penetrations – when 2 men penetrate one woman sometimes in one orifice, double anals, etc. I wonder what that is about. Is it not about male bonding, with the woman providing a platform for them to bond?"

"I haven't quite given it much thought, myself," said Lilly Loveless, not wanting the reflections to be a joint effort.

Desire continued: "That porn is a heterosexual male script is also seen in the ideal of the gigantic 'performing penis' which I understand is so supernatural that it turns on in spite of the woman, hence the term 'performing penis'. This is a fantasy even if some men have conditioned their penises for the camera lens. The men are always well built, in charge and big. It's not over until he is done, when he ejaculates usually all over her as if to prove that it has really happened. The 'invisibilisation' – I did not create this word – of women is seen in that we do not see 'objectively' when or how it is over for women because they are dependent on the performing penis's continued functionality. Once it's off duty the woman is left in the lurch. So what women think is of no consequence. All these nuanced and sometimes overt cues in the flicks propagate this idea that women's feelings do not matter. Sex is about male performance, exertion and the moment of ejaculation and all its loaded cultural significances. Women are vesicles for this. It is this reading of porn which I find disturbing."

Lilly Loveless resisted the temptation to interrupt with a question on in what way this was disturbing.

So Desire went on: "I also think that poverty, deepening poverty for the majority of Africans side by side with harsh dehumanizing armed conflicts pushes people to accept hardcore porn. This is one more, albeit pleasurable, abuse. For some people this may be a way of exorcising traumas, conflict, or abuse in the family... when social norms do not matter or mean anything at all. Actors of porn are invariably poor people, victims of war or other injustices who are in it for the money for themselves, their families or captors. I'm not saying that beauty and performance has no part to play, but matters of basic bread and butter override those when it comes to co-optation of Africans into the hardcore porn industry – which, as far as I am concerned, is at the forefront of everything rotten in this world, especially with the proliferation of digital camcorders and backstreet hotels, where every manner

of illegality goes on with utmost impunity. You'd be amazed by what goes on even here with students from our university. Recently there was the scandal of a student who, on her own accord, uploaded nude pictures of herself onto the web – casting her fishing net on the World Wide Web, she told her friends."

"I've heard something like that," Lilly Loveless agreed without elaborating.

"I also think that the AIDS pandemic in certain parts of Africa may have moved people, especially men to non-contact sex such as strip shows and watching porn. In places where AIDS has reached alarming proportions not only do men who think they have a reason to stay alive use condoms but now they limit the number of female partners. With their pleasure neutered by fear of AIDS, they channel interest in sex to other outlets that include using porn stars as proxy partners and virtual spaces as reality."

"You are very learned," said Lilly Loveless, full of admiration.

"Thanks," said Desire. "It's mostly my male colleagues who are so fussy about these things," she continued. "Be it normal relationships, pornography or academia, they are out to rape us into utter and total invisibility," Desire explained. "In feminist writings it has been suggested that most men have fantasies of conquering women or even raping them. This is of course controversial. What matters is that porn is made for male viewers; it's a male fantasy. The typical threesome is two women and one man, preferably the women do a lesbian scene. The man feeling envious, provoked, stimulated or all three by what the women do, or thinking of teaching the girls a lesson with his irate, erect – or is it elected – penis is a homophobic fantasy in which men typically think there is nothing to lesbianism – a situation not aided by the fascination lesbians have for sex toys that mimic male genitalia, or that overly dramatize their importance, as in the case of the double headed penis. Once the man enters the scene the women invariably stop their thing and attend to him. There is of course the 'full assault', where three men penetrate the same woman vaginally, anally, and orally all at the same time. I see in this an underlying assumption that real sex lies in penile penetration of women, regardless of which orifice is penetrated. And the fact that many female sex toys mimic the male penis and penchant for penetration just further proves the point. It's all in the penis in a world governed by phallocracy."

"That's really profound," said Lilly Loveless.

"I do not doubt that women have come to desire this kind of conquest and now fantasise having endless sex using any orifice in the female body... A man has to penetrate and occupy all available openings simultaneously or serially. What is missing in this porn is how women themselves feel about it. Do they enjoy it?"

"I think so. Some do, don't they?" ventured Lilly Loveless.

"If they do bravo! If they do not, we have a problem of abuse of women which will only stop if the market for this type of popular entertainment is no longer there. I have read of women who are so violated that they have all manner of complications including fistula, incontinences and so on. In small scale productions by amateurs, it is possible that the women may initially do them for fun. I heard a story right here in Puttkamerstown about a young woman in her 20s who, suffering from

heartbreak, recorded sex-explicit scenes of herself with another man and sent it to her ex-flame to snipe him. I suppose this was the young woman's take on the idea that men consider all women they have been with 'their women,' even when they are no longer interested in them, hence the popular belief that men are upset when they see ex-flames with other men. The flick was intercepted by others and the matter ended at the police station. Some women do it for the money and for fun, but eventually are enslaved by producers and subversive digital technology."

"I can neither validate or invalidate your theory, not having read much into this area, but I find what you say very compelling," Lilly Loveless felt pleased with her comment.

"One last point," said Desire. "Coming back to the popularity of hardcore porn... I suppose people want to push to envelope in experiencing pleasure. I know men who patronize sex workers who get them in pairs or trios, like in harem so that the women stimulate every little receptacle the man has for a fee. It could be Viagra or other drugs that make men veritable sex machines – no place for words as their toolkits do all the talking. I do not know if this is pleasurable for ordinary women who are not similarly stimulated. I suppose in gender politics we will know we have a revolution taking place when man to man porn is consumed openly because we know that there is a huge undercurrent of M2M out there. M2M sexual bonds in this sense remain sacrosanct – hidden, respected, sacred – while male-female bonds are cheapened. Porn is rewriting injustice, and the advent of Viagra and its reinvention of penetration as the ultimate indicator of sex turns the clock back on many achievements by the Feminist Movement. This is why some people have developed 'woman friendly porn' or 'couple friendly porn'. I do not think you will find it on hardcore shelves."

"So Viagra is a real monster of an invention," said Lilly Loveless, half question, half affirmation.

"Recently, I was at the cybercafé checking my email when this joke came through, forwarded by a woman I attended secondary school with, who now lives and works in southern Africa: A bride tells her newly wedded husband, 'Honey, you know I'm a virgin and I don't know anything about sex. Can you explain it to me first?' A broad and yearning smile on his face, the husband touches her caringly in places and says, 'OK, Sweetheart. In simple terms, let's call your thing the prison and my thing the prisoner. The game we play is PPP – Put the Prisoner in Prison. And it is imprisonment with hard labour, as no lying about is tolerated.'"

"Wow" said Lilly Loveless, surprised that Desire could bring herself to share a joke like this. She would have sworn such jokes were beneath her. "I can see where things are heading," she added.

"They made heated and passionate love for the first time. Afterwards, the husband is lying face up on the bed, panting like a lizard but smiling with satisfaction. With a giggle, the bride nudges him: 'Honey, the prisoner seems to have escaped.'"

"And what does he have to say for himself?"

"He turns on his side, a smile on his face, and says: 'Then we will have to re-imprison him.' After the second time, he reaches for a cigarette, but the bride, thoroughly in the mood, whispers to him with a smile in her eyes: 'Honey, the prisoner is out again!' The man rises to the occasion, but with the

unsteady legs of a drunk. Then, he falls back on the bed, totally exhausted. Again she nudges him: 'Honey, the prisoner escaped again.' Barely able to turn his head, the man yells at her: 'Hey, look here! It's not a life sentence, OK?'"

"I can well imagine what could happen after the prisoner has served his sentence and returned to a normal working life," volunteered Lilly Loveless.

"What?" Desire was curious.

"I imagine his employer complaining: 'Mr P, I didn't know you had such a small organ,' and he replying, 'How was I supposed to know I'd been playing in front of such a huge cathedral?'"

"Wow!" said Desire. "And does he keep his job?"

"I imagine him, after working for a few years, requesting a promotion and a raise, and advancing as reasons the fact of his hard physical labour, working at great depths, plunging headfirst into everything he did, working upside down in dark, poorly ventilated conditions and in a high humidity environment. I also imagine him complaining about not getting weekends, holidays and time off after extra hours or not being paid overtime, and about being exposed to contagious diseases."

"And what do you imagine management telling him in response?" enquired Desire, enjoying Lilly Loveless' imagination.

"Dear Mr P, after considering your request and assessing the arguments raised, management rejects your request for these reasons: You do not work 8 hours straight during any work period; you do not answer immediately to all requests, do not always follow the orders of the management team nor take initiative. Instead, you have to be pressured and stimulated to start working. You easily fall asleep at work, show little evidence of fidelity at the workplace, and prefer working alone than with others. You leave the worksite rather messy at the end of your shift, and often leave work too early. You are grossly unable to work double shifts, and will certainly retire well before 65. And as if that were not enough, you have been observed entering and leaving the workplace carrying two suspicious looking bags." Lilly Loveless was pleased with her effort, and so was Desire.

"Jokes like this used to make sense, but with the coming of Viagra, it's the bride who screams for mercy from a deaf and dumb penis made to operate like a workman whose only tool is a hammer and to whom every problem is a nail," Desire concluded.

"I like that!" screamed Lilly Loveless, excitedly. "Could you repeat it?"

Desire repeated, slowly, and Lilly Loveless jotted, getting things down word for word.

"But Viagra is not the only villain in town," added Desire. "General insensitivity by men to women's sexual needs has always been around. In societies where extreme forms of female genital cutting are practiced it is also possible that women find penetrative sex less pleasurable. I have read personal testimonies of women from certain parts of Mimboland who say penetration is uncomfortable for them. Come to think of it, I haven't read much about non-circumcised women finding it pleasurable. Some simply resolve the need for intimacy in the sense of tender loving care through woman-to-woman non-penetrative sex away from their husbands or boyfriends. Sex with men is endured for childbearing and economic security."

"I really appreciate what you have said," remarked Lilly Loveless. "I can see that these are things you have thought through for some time, although your modesty won't allow you to agree. Have you always felt like this about love?"

"You do really have a way of digging under one's feet, don't you?"

"I do my best," replied Lilly Loveless. "Research is a difficult exercise."

Desire got up, went to a cupboard, and took out a bundle of letters, which she had carefully folded away. "This is my love," said she, placing the bundle on the table. "I have had two serious relationships, but with very little to write home about at the end of the day."

"Please tell me, if you don't mind," implored Lilly Loveless.

"That will have to wait till tomorrow evening," said Desire. "I'm late for a women's meeting somewhere in town."

When Desire left, Lilly Loveless stayed back to develop her notes. The interview was too rich for her to postpone writing up, as she didn't want to risk forgetting anything Desire said. She was particularly impressed with Desire's knowledge of issues, much of which confirmed what she, Lilly Loveless, had read from various sources. On Viagra for instance, Lilly Loveless had read that the initial reason for its launch over a decade ago, was to serve as a love potion for impotent men. But not only was the drug soon to become the darling of healthy men desirous of enhancing their virility and terrorizing women with eternal erections, it also became a sensation and the messiah to the pornographic industry the world over. Thanks to Viagra and the unyielding erections it generates, men are invited to cross the boundaries of acceptability in sexuality under the gaze of prying cameras by demonstrating that they can do it again and again and again. The message is clear: Gone are the days when men risked too little sex because of defective erections, or when they were forced to embrace foreplay, kissing and touching in order to prolong or continue a journey abandoned by their failing erections. Viagra has indeed brought back to life the self-confidence that was dead and buried in many men.

However, if what Lilly Loveless had read was anything to go by, Viagra was more a source of pain than pleasure for women. Far from enhancing the ability of men to be good lovers, Viagra was turning men into automated penetration zombies, programmed to test drive to destruction women for whom penetration with an enlarged penis is hardly a priority to good love-making. The road to a woman's orgasm is long, narrow and full of detours that demand mastery of roadmaps and creative improvisation. By overplaying the centrality of penetrative sex, Viagra takes away from the game of love the creativity that makes a woman feel 'this is for me as well.' With Viagra has come arrogance amongst men informed by total ignorance of what it takes to please and pleasure a woman. The subtle suggestiveness of Playboy has given way to the crude and brutal monotony of the Viagra-driven hardcore porn industry. With Viagra, men flex the muscle of their third leg in the face of every one that catches their fancy with an "I am the answer to your problem" attitude. But such insensitivity to understand women and their real needs, is leading to divorces not disconnected from the Viagra syndrome. More and more women are impatient with the "acts of lust" that have come with Viagra to replace the "acts of love".

Lilly Loveless couldn't wait to see Desire again.

“When I started teaching here at the University of Mimbo, it was as an instructor,” began Desire, as soon as Lilly Loveless was seated. They were sitting on the veranda watching the night approach, as the sun retired behind the mountain like a tired traveller.

Desire opened the soft drinks she bought, Lilly Loveless having declined to take a beer, not wanting to miss even a word of what she had convinced herself was going to be a great story.

Desire continued: “I was paired up with a tall, dark, handsome, sophisticated senior lecturer, Dr Sexwale, who was supposed to teach me the tricks of the trade. I won’t hide from you. What is there to hide? He was a manly man, a real man with brains. I fell in love with the guy the first day I watched him teach. I fell in love with how at ease he was! He seemed to enjoy himself. He made me imagine that teaching can be fun when one can see students understanding, when both students and teachers are motivated.

“What I remember most from that class though was the pleasure I had in just watching him speak, the reality of him sitting calmly at the desk mixed up with imagined memories of his smooth skin rubbing against mine, his tender caresses, a myriad of sensations flooding my thoughts. There was something very exciting in trying to reconcile the two worlds of his public, professional appearance with the intimacy I imagined we shared. Just like it turned me on to find him working on his papers for publication at his office, or to hear him talk with colleagues about this or that university committee meeting when what I wanted most of all was to get rid of those colleagues and have him all to myself so that I could make mad love to him until the end of time.

“I was lucky he eventually fell for me, but cruel as life is, it happened just two weeks before he took up a prestigious professorship with a university in Muzunguland.”

“How sad,” interjected Lilly Loveless.

“So often I have considered love and sex to be disjunct spheres – both appear easier to handle that way – but with Dr Sexwale they seemed to have melted together into one overwhelming complex of intense happiness and – now that he was so far away – fervent longing, longing to have him, to discover him, to discover with him, to talk, to laugh, to be with him in every possible way. I wanted to make love with him with my entire soul, I wanted it never to end, and I wanted it so badly that sometimes it frightened me, lest I should lose him. I would imagine myself in-between actually saying to him in letters that took forever to arrive: ‘Sexwale, Sexwale, I don’t think I’ve ever longed for anyone as intensely as I long for you. Every day without you seems like an entirety. I live my daily life here, teach bloody Women’s Studies, tend my flowers, play with my thesis, involve myself with the usual happenings in the house, but there’s always an important part of me that’s not participating, a part that is waiting, waiting to be together with you again, waiting for you to bring that part of me to life again. It really hurts to miss you like this. I wonder how long it will be before I can feel you in my arms again.’”

“That’s powerful,” remarked Lilly Loveless, “very powerful.”

"I lived daydream after daydream: 'Sexwale, my dearest, how I would love to hear your voice again! So many times I've replayed in my mind moments that we had together – even our very first meeting is etched in my memory in sharp detail, every word you said, the way you looked, the strange ease with which we – total strangers – conversed. I know exactly what you were wearing and how you were leaning on the table at your office. There are so many moments with you that I remember in every minute detail. Do you really think we'll have a chance to increase the repertoire? I often catch myself imagining how it will be to see you again (to feel you again! to have you so close again!)"

Lilly Loveless was itching to interrupt with comments of how passionate Desire's reveries were, and how much she had never thought her name so appropriately chosen. But she thought twice, not wanting Desire to lose her train of thought.

"I fell in love at a very difficult time, when communication was not as easy as it is now. There was no email, no cell phones, and even the regular phones were difficult to come by. We relied on the good old capricious postal service. Often I would find myself complaining: 'Oh, Sexwale, this long-distance communication is becoming too difficult. I must see you live soon. Telephone conversations like the one this morning make me feel so helpless and far away. And the slow postal service is evidently creating a huge time lapse in the letter business. You said you received my dream-letter, but to me it seems like ages ago that I sent that one off, and since then I'm sure I've sent more than one letter each week.'

"Silences were often frustrating and cause for serious concern both ways. Sometimes, I would write explaining my apparent silence at the same time as I complained about his: 'Sexwale Dear, forgive my silence if you haven't read from me, but I've been writing non-stop. You are always on my mind! And I haven't heard from you in such a long time – how are you? Sometimes, when I check my mailbox only to find it empty again, a little pang of pops up. Is something wrong? Are you still there? Did a letter get lost in the mail? Are you too busy? Angry? Tired? In love with some Muzungulander beauty? How I wish I could just hear your reassuring voice! How I wish I could surprise you at your office at the university to drag you off somewhere for some of whatever beer you drink out there, the quiet night enveloping us into our own sweet world, away from Women's Studies and Puttkamerstown rain, away from every other woman in red, white, black or any other colour, for that matter, away from the harsh reality of this huge distance between us, together, close together, so close that your breath becomes mine and I no longer know where my skin ends and yours begins. So often I dream of you! So often I imagine the touch of your hands, the tinkling of your voice – I don't hear it. I feel it somewhere in the depths of my stomach, where your voice resounds, filling me with a warmth and hunger, a yearning to become one with you and never to separate again. I imagine you and me together, endless walks along the Sakersbeach coast, endless talks, and endless nights. I imagine you in my bed, I imagine falling asleep beside you knowing that you'll be there when I wake up again – how I wish I could put into words the feeling of complete and intense joy that would give me. I don't know if it will ever happen. I don't really want to consider that – it is just a fierce wish, an absorbing fantasy that I relive almost every night before

dropping off to sleep. And sleep is what I intend to do right now, as it is 2am and many unpleasant tasks at the University of Mimbo await me tomorrow. I'll get back to you soon, I promise. In the meantime please know that I'm missing you badly, longing for you (and for more time, to write a longer letter)."

"Wow!" exclaimed Lilly Loveless. "Are you a writer by any chance?"

"I've never written a line of poetry or whatever in my life, but everyone is a writer who listens to the voice of love."

"Well put. May I quote that? All rights reserved, of course."

"You may quote anything..."

"Thank you, thank you indeed... I'm moved."

"My imagination was my closest companion then, and it felt so real and sweet, when it led me just where my heart and feelings most wanted to be."

"You mean your fantasies?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"My creative imagination, or whatever," said Desire. "Just one example, so you know what I mean. One afternoon I was sitting out in my little garden, when I noticed that the plants weren't doing so well. Just then, I imagined Sexwale sitting there with me. He agreed, when he saw the straggly tomato vines forlornly creeping from the planters onto the cement. We withdrew to the room. Our voices were touched with sadness and nostalgia as we conversed. We eventually began touching, fondling and kissing each other hungrily. It didn't take long before we were making love, gently, then more energetically. At one moment, a grimace came over his face, and he asked me to put my hand by his testicles. I stood up and let him guide me. I saw the white bud of a flower and pulled on it gently as he continued to grimace. It came into my hand. In my palm, the bud opened slowly, then flew into the air. We marvelled. Again, that same grimace came across his face. I brought my hand to him. This time a pink bud from him bloomed into many petals and shades of red and flew from my hand. Soon, no matter where I put my hand, it would draw flowers. I touched the bend in his leg, behind his knee cap, and roses arose. From between his toes came violets and yellow margaritas. A gentle touch to his armpit brought tropical varieties. And on and on... like magic, like a magician endlessly pulling scarves from his fist or birds from her blouse."

"Exhausted, he asked me to lie down. And he spread my legs. He brought forth a bushel of every colour imaginable and unimaginable. Flowers continued to fill the room. The intermixing scents created one that was unique and indescribable. I sensed the flowers overflowing through the window onto the courtyard, and out the door of the room onto the balcony. We had been making love, in a penetrating, interpenetrating way. Now people walking around the courtyard or down the street would surely wonder what was blooming, as we did ourselves."

"Fearing we might suffocate, from the intensity, I sighed tenderly. All of a sudden, the flowers retreated, absorbed by the walls and ceiling and floor. Half sitting, half lying, we caught our breaths and, looking around us, realized the white walls were now papered with flowers. A lavish flowery carpet covered the floor. It had not been there before."

"It must feel great to have a creative mind like yours, a mind capable of summoning absence to appear in such a lifelike way," commented Lilly

Loveless, truly marvelled.

Desire smiled and said: "The imagination, however creative, can never truly stand in for the real thing. Physical presence is needed, and no amount of virtuality or fantasy could match that."

"But you have a better mind than most people, and that must help when what you love is not what you get."

"Love can be so cruel," said Desire, "long distance love, especially. Once I saw someone who was leaving for Muzunguland, and found myself writing: 'I'm so jealous! How I would love to join him! Not only because I so feverishly long to see you again (if only you knew how much!), but also because Muzunguland has gained such a grip on me that I'm constantly scheming and dreaming up ways of migrating there.'"

"There were nights I just couldn't sleep: 'Sexwale, Sexwale, writing to you like this makes me long for you even more: there's so much we could share! If only you were here with me – I would gladly rearrange my place to make room for you! I wonder if you received my most recent letters? I have not been so good about sending photocopies as well just to increase chances of you receiving them – generally I'm too lazy, rushed, and hope to save time in the mail by posting the letter just before the post office closes for the day. Have I done something wrong? Are you angry with me for some reasons unknown to me? Are you in love with someone else? Please, please tell me if you are? Of course I would be jealous, but really I would understand if that happened. Trust me.'"

"There were days when my self confidence took a serious bashing: 'Last night I had a strange dream about you. Somehow you'd managed to get a ride (!) to Nyamandem, where I was doing archive research on Women's Movements in Colonial Mimboland. You arrived at my hotel (which actually seemed more like a hospital, white and anonymous) unexpectedly, and when I saw you I was so overwhelmed with gladness that I could do nothing but cry. I took you in my arms and put my hands under your shirt, and the touch of your smooth skin enveloped me completely, filling me with sadness and joy and a hopeless hunger to make love to you until the end of time. But when I asked you to come to bed with me, you refused.'"

"What? Refused?" Lilly Loveless was astonished.

"Yes, refused," affirmed Desire. She continued: "'Every time you opened your mouth to tell me why, something happened to interrupt – the phone rang, someone knocked at the door, all kinds of maddening trivialities. I've never felt so helpless, having you so close to me while you were in some other world. I was furious, wondering what lady had stolen your tender touch from me and telling myself that I didn't care, if only you'd be mine for one moment. Alas, whatever it was that was keeping you from me remained, looming large behind your peculiar silence, and I had to make do with the memory (oh so strong!) of the touch of your smooth skin, the sweet smell of your neck. The stone that nestled itself somewhere in the depths of my stomach when we parted in Sawang made itself felt again, and it has been with me all day. What is wrong, Sexwale? Do you believe in dreams? I do, and I cannot stop wondering what this one means. Maybe it's the fear that when/if you come to Mimboland, you won't want me anymore, the fear that in the long months of our separation something will have changed, and the fear that everything will look different in light of your Muzunguland

experience. But I long for you so much, so completely! If only I could really feel your skin as I did in my dream. Sometimes it hurts too much, this missing you. Please give me a sign of life soon!"

"I hope he did," interjected Lilly Loveless, anxious.

"It was a particularly long wait, that one. I remember writing: 'I have gone to bed (relatively) early. It's cold and lonely and I'm longing for you fervently. Again, two days have passed and the post office had no news from you. Please, please don't let me suffer in silence like this. If the flame has died down, at least tell me, so that I can try to deal with missing you forever. Sexwale, if only you knew how I burn inside when I think of you; if only you knew how I dream of you; if only you could imagine the longing I feel when I remember your touch, your voice, your sweet smell. Each and every day I'm aware of the stone that lodged itself in my stomach when we parted in Sawang. Each and every day I ponder the peculiarity of our bonding at that first lecture of yours I attended as instructor under your mentorship. You being you, you felt much beyond words, and was able to psyche me out just by studying my eyebrows! I like being physical and everything else with you, because it makes our relationship more spiritual somehow, more whole. I like losing myself totally into you sometimes and having you lose yourself in me. I suppose you'd use different words. You've led me to believe or I've let myself believe I actually love you. Each and every day I recall – shivering – the passion of Mountain Valley where we were like a bottle of champagne, joy bubbling up, celebrating life. Sometimes recalling even a word of yours, a look of yours, can make me close my eyes and go deep. It is in giving that we gain and share. You're the man of my dreams. I just dream that some of your smartness could rub off on me somehow..."

"Where are you? Why must you be so faraway from me? Why oh why are you so silent? Will you come to Mimboland, yes or no? Please, I want to know! I want so badly to take you into my arms and make love to you until dawn, until I no longer know where I start and you begin, until I can feel our souls meet. I want to talk to you, listen to you, work with you, be with you completely, eat, laugh and drink with you, dream, sleep and think with you, see, feel and consider little Sexwale with you... I must confess that little Sexwale was on my mind a lot today, too. You know that I badly want a child, and you remember also that we spoke briefly of the possibility that you be the father. I wondered today if that idea wasn't overly hurried and impulsive. But I also like the idea and realise that such decisions are always, to a degree, irrational and impulsive. And I also find it difficult to discuss it long-distance.

"Last night I dreamt we were together, intimately divine, your warmth travelling to me through my tummy that you palmed gently, thoughtfully. Later you drew me onto you. I felt you in me and you drawing me closer and closer, gently and forcefully, with wild and controlled pushes and pulls of trust, of love, of desire. I can't get the look in your eyes out of my mind. If I close my eyes I see yours, translucent, becoming transcendent. Was this look there before and I just never saw it? To begin, it was like looking deep into a well. You drew me in, you took me far away. Your eyes, they were... like a pond or a lake with many outlets. I fell into them and started swimming, the breast stroke. Gracefully, elegantly, head bobbing above the water regularly for breaths of air. I felt myself smiling while my own eyes

rained tears that merged into the surrounding waters ...

"But where are you? Sexwale, Sexwale, your silence makes me so unsure, so impatient. Am I asking too much? Maybe. But when you don't write I start to wonder if the love that I thought I felt was only a figment of my imagination, I start to wonder if it was all in my mind; perhaps it meant more to me than to you, perhaps I was too naive to think that your love for me was real? I will try to sleep now, taking you with me in my thoughts..."

"And finally..." It was Lilly Loveless, still anxious.

"Finally, something trickled through and I drank like someone crossing a desert without water. I let him know how therapeutic that was: 'you cannot know how overcome with relief and happiness I am, having received your letter this morning. After so many weeks – it felt like years – of silence, at last I hear you speak kind and reassuring words to me again, and I'm overwhelmed by a longing for you that seems to increase in intensity every time I reread your letter, absorbing every detail, listening to your voice behind the written words. I have come to suspect the postal system once more of playing havoc with our love life. Perhaps it is not the postal system which is to blame, but rather the incredible slowness of time: every day without word from you seems like an eternity.'

"And whenever there was word, my imagination would run ahead of every single word he wrote. My mind was more than fertile, and phrases like these were salted in my thoughts: 'Special time with you makes me want to push away the days we would run out of things to share. When you said you could imagine me trying to figure out where I was going to set a jus4us tea cup I thought you were going to say you could imagine yourself on my lap, me trying to figure out just what to do, where to look ... with my eyes...'

"At a point, the temptation was great to raise money at all cost to visit Sexwale. I thought of this filthy rich guy who was chasing after me, the type students these days commonly call Mboma. What if I went to him for money to finance my trip? Tempted though I was, I decided against it. I could not ask this man because that would imply meanly taking advantage of his feelings for me without intending to return those feelings. In the event that I accepted travel money from him, I would be heightening his hopes that I might fall in love with him. It might just rekindle the same old story about being in love with me and me having 'used' him all along and misleading him into thinking that I felt more for him than I do. I suppose he would be right to a certain extent, I did accept a good deal of help from him, and though I – to my knowledge – was quite clear in my refusal of romance, perhaps it is not possible for him to see friendship for the sake of friendship as a real possibility. And no doubt he has indeed been misled and used frequently in the past, not least by women who thought to gain something by associating with him. He always makes his doings sound highly strategic and essential, but really my impression is that he has very little to do but dine with hotshots here and there, and for the rest is extremely bored. While it is quite conceivable that such exaggerated airs of importance may have facilitated his vulnerability to being exploited, they have not helped his case with me. It is too easy to abuse someone who is suffering from unrequited love: he would do almost anything to have me near him, if he thought it might make me want him. I am afraid my conscience could not cope with that. I may not be in love with him, but I do have friendly feelings for him, and even if I didn't, I

could not possibly abuse him like that.

"Poor man! Even though I told him outright that I wasn't interested in romance with him, of course he still cherished hopes that he could convince me. Unrequited love must be one of the most difficult things to bear. And how illogical love can be! And persistent! I suppose that the fact that I could not be bought made me attractive to him, and he tried hard to win me by offering me whatever my heart desired. Little did he know that what I wanted, namely Sexwale, was not for sale either. Anyway, his disappointment was not my problem. But I would be the last person to take it to the point of making a fool of his love by asking for money in the interest of my love for someone else."

"How cruel reality can be. Money always seems to be in the wrong hands," said Lilly Loveless.

"Luck did strike, though," said Desire. "I received a most pleasant surprise. Sexwale announced that he had saved up enough money to pay for me to come and visit. I could not wait for the day to board the plane, and made my anxious excitement known in the letters I wrote him: 'Easter vacation seems very soon and at the same time so far away – how will I manage to contain myself in the days before we meet again? I have imagined thousands of times how we will meet: I fantasize about a multitude of details (where will it be? at the airport? at a train station? at the harbour? what will we say? what will he be wearing? what will I be wearing? how will he look at me? where will we go?), but all the details soon become irrelevant in the light of the burning passion, able at last to flow freely and carry us away to a world where details like words and clothing have no significance. I hear you say Easter but I dare not rely on that date, for fear that something might happen to force the trip to be postponed."

"No such thing happened, I hope," Lilly Loveless was eager to know.

"I flew out and we met, celebrated the reunion the way only lovers do, and for two weeks virtually redefined paradise."

"Wow! You do know how to tell a story."

"Then the time came for us to separate. Much as I intended not to mull over our two weeks together before arriving home, my mind was full of memories jostling around, struggling to gain my attention. Certain parts of the two weeks replayed in my mind like a movie, only to be interrupted by "real life" on the plane back home. Sometimes it is impossible to say whether some things are a consequence of time/distance, or whether they are inherent in all relationships. For example, I caught myself thinking that it is next to impossible for us to really get to know each other profoundly, as I wanted us to, because we were forced to live such distinct lives in such distant places. But, on second thought, I knew, too, that even if Sexwale lived in Puttkamerstown, I would continue to try to find out who he really, quintessentially is, without my curiosity ever being fully satisfied. That is one of the most fascinating, addictive (and at times frustrating!) aspects of any relationship, I suppose. No matter how close, one person can never truly know the other. I think that when we were together, I was often – though usually not consciously or intentionally – collecting data, integrating the new data into the image I already had of who he was, and holding the new image up against the light to see if it still fitted, revising here and there, erasing previous misconceptions, refining details, adding new ones, altering the

shades of colours, trying to make the picture complete and true to life. It is a continuous process, of course, as my own premises of observation were constantly changing, as well as the object of my investigation. And of course it was a futile exercise, in that I could never capture the total complex of his soul, and yet it was addictive, and valid besides: as with social science endeavours, the ultimate truth, if it at all exists, cannot be grasped, but that does not negate the need for, or the legitimacy of, the search itself.

"Still, time and distance do make themselves felt. I know I was constantly aware of the clock ticking away throughout the whole two weeks I spent with Sexwale, and I felt pressured to make good use of every minute, worried that some questions might remain unasked or unanswered, some important thought not expressed, some gesture not made, some misinterpretation not cleared up... two weeks are treacherously short when the agenda is so complex, the urges so intense and the future so uncertain. Some things caught me by surprise, like my own feelings of intense sadness when all of a sudden I saw our shared future developing in an endless chain of short term stays, our relationship disjunct from the surroundings in which it thrived, semi-nomadic hearts, outsiders, partitioned lives... Had I not envisioned this prospect before? Perhaps not, though I find that hard to believe. But if I envisioned it, the scenario did not evoke in me the sadness that overwhelmed me on the day Sexwale took me to his favourite bar – what they call out there a pub. It still saddened me after I left for Puttkamerstown, but the sadness was not as intense as in Corkscrew, as the bar was called, if I remember correctly. I had become familiar with the feeling, I suppose, I was not surprised by it, I knew this prospect was a very real (though not entirely unavoidable) one and something that was better recognised than ignored. Besides, there was no point crying over spilled milk. Until some miracle occurred, I had to try to come to terms with my virtual mistress-status. I knew Sexwale disliked that term, but I think it was not so inaccurate."

"Virtual mistress? Was he married then? I'd understand that more readily in these days of internet, email, webcam, Skype and all, but not in association with the age of the letter to which your relationship belonged." Lilly Loveless was surprised at the use of the word.

"I was not married to him, and there was little regular physical contact to make the relationship grow," replied Desire. "On this I wrote to him more times than I can recollect. The letters were usually variations of this: 'Sexwale Darling, Long distances are not very good for relationships. Ours has survived it. But your silence is succeeding where distance has failed. Your silence tells me you are too busy, too busy to even send a letter. I do not think it is a crime to miss you. Your silence is taking its toll. Sorry if I bother you with my worries.'

"I see," said Lilly Loveless, nodding thoughtfully.

"When I returned home, I wrote to Sexwale: 'After a fairly uneventful morning of sleeping, washing clothes, chatting with neighbours, tending my plants and flowers, etc. I've once again installed myself on my sofa – with a pot of Mimbo-Tea, this time – to write to you. How far away you seem already, after one night's separation! How I wish I could wake up in your arms every day like I did in Muzunguland; that first morning there of slowly waking up with you, talking, feeling, at that moment, everything seemed to fit, it felt like home, warm and trusting and safe, familiar. So many

memories, questions, contemplations are flooding my mind now – it's difficult to make sense of it all, let alone put it into words. There are many things in our relationship that I find trying – a web of interconnected things like our separation, personality-clashes – but my strongest feeling now is that I love you completely. The words 'I love you' sound so ordinary, so superficial, but I know no others to describe my intense longing for you. Feelings I had before the visit have, I think, deepened and broadened – I think I know you more now, and the more I know you, the more I love you. That gives me a very deep, satisfied, peaceful feeling. But it also frightens me, for the more I show you of myself, the more painful rejection by you will be if you decide that you've had enough. Sometimes I'm really afraid that your feelings for me will have changed, and I feel constantly in need of reassurance. I do not like to feel this need, but I cannot deny its presence, either. Love is such a complicated affair! Do you ever feel that need for reassurance? How can one really be reassured?

“So many gestures and words can be ambivalent: like a caress – sometimes it's an expression of a warm feeling for the other, but it can also imply a demand: see me! I'm here! Respond to me and show me that it is me that you want! Speaking of caressing: did I tell you (I think not) that I like it so much when you run your fingers through my hair – like when we were sitting in your garden, like sometimes in the early morning, like the first evening at the restaurant... and when you held me and stroked my back, I can think of nothing else in this world I would rather have than that – like after the shirt-washing scene in the bathroom. I don't know exactly why, but you are also able to infuriate me as almost nobody else can. You'd win an Oscars both ways with me, I think. Saturday evening at the restaurant was not an easy one. But the fact that we were able to talk about it made me very optimistic – I think we can go a long, long way together if we are able to talk things through, keeping in mind our common goal, finding ways to understand and accommodate each other. It is so important to understand our own and the other's behaviour and feelings! I want no stone left unturned, so that we can come closer and closer...”

“One thing we did during my two weeks in Muzunguland was try for a baby. When at the end of the month I saw my period, I had to share my disappointment with Sexwale: 'I'm very sorry indeed about the little Sexwale. I wanted it very badly, and was thinking of it all the time, ever since leaving you in Muzunguland. I was very disappointed this morning to find out that we had not succeeded. I had imagined having a reminder of you with me for the rest of my life through the junior Sexwale, and that was a prospect that made me so very happy. I admit that I was also frightened at times by the responsibility I had taken upon myself, to be a single mother, with less than what one could meaningfully term an income, lacking a family on which to rely for support, and with an altogether uncertain future, even as regards a roof above our heads. But I also felt determined and strong enough to fight the various battles that my little Sexwale and I would encounter on our path. Of course it might well be a matter of timing – we were together in the second half of my cycle, when chances of conception are small – but I also worry that maybe I am infertile altogether. I hope not, but I am irrationally pessimistic in this respect, expecting the worst so as not to be disappointed in the future. The girlfriend of one of our colleagues here at the university – Dr Munyinge

Trouble – is pregnant and I found it irritating to have her around his office next door to mine, rubbing her swelling belly all the time and talking about the pregnancy. She cannot know how her own happiness heightens my sadness, and yet I found it hard not to be annoyed with her. Only a day or two earlier I had imagined the little Sexwale and the little Munyinge (I don't like the surname Trouble) playing together in our big flower garden to be."

Lilly Loveless could see that Desire didn't understand ovulation, which could occur early or late in a cycle, though most women ovulated between days 10-16. If she made her trip after she had ovulated, there would be zero chance that she would get pregnant. "Why do you think you could be infertile?" asked she. "If it is too personal, you don't have to tell me," she added when Desire hesitated.

"Yes, it is personal," said Desire. "Let's keep it at that."

"So how did Dr Sexwale take this news?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"He was devastated, and told me so in a phone call. His letters dried up all of a sudden, mine as well, somehow. Then one day he wrote. I replied: 'You write that you felt you might have lost me to someone else, thanks to distance, but I can wholly reassure you that that is not the case, and though I at times feel quite lonely, I have no inclinations to pursue a romantic relationship with anyone for the time being. In all honesty, I must say that there are two reasons for that: you and Ernest. As you know, I had considerable difficulty dealing with the break-up with Ernest. I have never been so wounded by a (failed) relationship as in the Ernest case, and have become very cautious because of that, intending never again to allow myself to be hurt so profoundly. I am well aware that that sometimes makes me hesitant towards you. My feelings for you are too strong for words, I miss you horribly and think of you all the time, but I am very afraid also, of allowing myself to become attached to what may prove to be an illusion, or perhaps just an impossibility: this distance between us complicates matters awfully. I find it very difficult to think about our future together when there are no realistic possibilities for us to be together in a normal situation, and at the same time I am so afraid that your patience will run out and that you will give up. This must sound very contradictory and vague! I suppose in a nutshell I am trying to say that I love you and miss you dreadfully, but that I am also afraid, afraid of being rejected by you, and afraid that this fear, compounded by our physical separation, will prevent this relationship from blossoming.'"

"What did he say?"

"He didn't reply immediately, but eventually he did. At this point of our relationship, letters were drying up, but the postal system was not to blame. Tensions and questions were more visible, at least, from my standpoint in the relationship. I found myself revisiting issues and scenes, reading new meanings, and writing questioning letters: 'You are not as open a book as you claim to be. Not mentioning having a son from your secondary school days is a case in point! These would be very sober letters indeed if, as you seem to suggest, we were only to share with each other those details of our lives which were explicitly asked for by the other party: if that were the case, you would not know about my friend Alice, for example. Rather than wait for you to prompt me to tell you things that you might imagine to be relevant, I prefer to volunteer information which I myself find worth sharing.

The letter-writer or the person speaking ought to take responsibility for the subject matter, and not let the contents be determined solely by the suggestions of the reader/listener. Not so? How am I to know which questions to ask? How am I to be certain that I have not neglected to tackle an issue which is important to you, but which escaped my attention or lies beyond my understanding? I'd rather leave the initiative to you in that regard. And my interest in the lady in red who kissed you at the Corkscrew, as you very well know, was not motivated by any personal interest of mine in her affairs, but was, rather, rooted in a not altogether surprising or unrealistic fear of losing you to a rival who had the advantage of being physically close to you and to whom you, through your own admission (even if under duress) are attracted. Nor, for that matter, can my interest in her be seen to negate my interest in other people in your life. It would no doubt appear odd to you if I considered your occasional questions about Ernest reason to remain silent about other people and happenings that occupy me. I think we should strive to attain complete frankness: in a long-distance relationship like ours, complete trust, openness and honesty are of even more paramount importance than in relationships where distance plays no role."

"Good," said Lilly Loveless. "And what did he have to say for himself, in reply?"

"If he bothered to reply, that is," Desire corrected. "As I waited for a sign from him, I reread some of his letters for unanswered questions or unattended issues. When I found one, that was reason to write. In one instance, I wrote: 'In one of your letters to me you made reference to unanswered questions, posed in your earlier letters. There is one question which has been on my mind ever since you posed it, somewhere in June, I believe, and that is: whether I could stand you as a husband? I have not answered sooner, because really I don't know how to, but I realise that I am obliged to answer, and really ought not to have kept you waiting for so long. The truth is, that I cannot imagine being married to you, or to anyone else for that matter. I have contemplated the question often, but my imagination doesn't reach far enough for me to envisage a situation of being married to you: Where? What kind of life am I to consider? What about your past and current life? Would I not lose you if I married you? What would you expect of a wife like me?..."

"Many interruptions later... Before going to sleep last night I reread a whole pile of your letters, and that made me long for you more than ever. You and this letter were constantly on my mind all day at the university today, and I couldn't wait to get back home to finish the letter - I realise that you have heard too little from me the past months and feel badly about my failure to get myself organised enough to write to you regularly. Although, to be fair, it must be added that it takes two to tango.

"I found the letter in which you asked me if I could stand you as a lifetime partner. But how can I possibly see into the future? I want you now and cannot imagine that I would stop longing for you, but I am realistic enough to know that in relationships, there are no guarantees. You say that if you were to marry me, I would need a lot of taming, domestication, harnessing, and so on. But of course you know as well as I do, that I cannot be tamed, domesticated or harnessed in the way you imagine, or the way one would do to one's cat, dog, goat or horse. If that could be done, you would

lose the Desire that you know now, and we would both end up losing. But marriage is not, to me, the most important thing. That is not what I am after, at least not now. Not because we irritate each other at times, but simply because I don't really believe that marriage offers any added value to our relationship. Of course I sometimes feel jealous of your being out there in close proximity to the lady in red, but that wouldn't change even if I had the same geography as she. It is more important to me to know what I mean to you regardless of the institutional framework. I wouldn't want to bind you to me by marriage. Rather, I long to know that we have an emotional bond that will be strengthened and renewed time and again because of its own strength.

"But love is such a murky thing: what is it, really? The more one wonders, the less one finds answers, it seems. I feel so many things about you: I feel wanted and admired, but also challenged, and confronted with myself (who am I really, who are you, is it possible to ever know that?) I love to talk with you, to exchange ideas, to hear you talk and laugh, to feel that you are hearing what I say and responding to me. I admire you, I think you are very clever, and wish I had some of your wit and insight. When together with you, I have never experienced a dull moment, and that is rare, as I very easily become bored with most people. But you appeal to me in so many ways that I feel addicted like a mimbo to his mimbo: the more I think I know of you, the greater my hunger to dig deeper, and the greater my inclination to share more of myself with you, too.

"Day to day life, as in a marriage situation, doesn't attract me, because mundane irritations get in the way of what I really want, which is a far deeper and more meaningful way of being together, of communicating at a level unobstructed by habits, obligations, time schedules, a relationship in which openness, trust, warmth and a real sense of togetherness play important roles... and yet I see myself contradicting myself, too, because I also feel that normal life can make it possible to attain that deeper level of communication. And I also know that, for example, I very much enjoy seeing you in your professional environment as when you were my mentor here at Mimbo, and would love to be closer to you in that sense, too. The memory of seeing you at your office at Mimbo, or teaching, or typing away on your laptop, or organising seminars on campus – all those memories fill me with a feverish yearning to be with you, to admire you while you go about your business in your charming and friendly manner, knowing that at the first possible opportunity I will be lying next to you, skin to skin, completely enveloped by your presence, breathing you into my system. Oh, how I wish we could be together again here in Puttkamerstown, even if just for a short time, so that I could be reassured by your touch and your voice. This unrequited wish makes me castigate a world order in which for an African scholar to prove their worth, they must migrate to a university in Muzunguland. Do those who encourage this practice realize the intellectual and emotional haemorrhage they are causing Africa?"

Lilly Loveless put several stars against this particular question in her notebook, but did not interrupt with a request for Desire to elaborate.

"Writing like this makes missing you a painful thing. I'll stop now and post this to you straight away: it always gives me a good feeling to know that there is something on its way to you. You asked for answers: yes, I can stand you as a life time partner (your words). Far more than that, I want you

as a partner for as long as I can imagine. I hope I have given you some idea of what I feel that such a partnership entails. I would like to hear what you think of all this. Have I answered your question(s)? How do you feel about it? Are you still with me? I have been thinking a lot about this relationship, and one thing I realise is that it requires a serious effort and investment: because of what I want from it, and because of the parameters within which we are compelled to operate. I feel very bad about having invested so little during the past months: I know that without regular communication, we are destined to fail, and I truly regret us having kept each other waiting for so long, so often. On that note, I better get this letter in the mail now, and intend to get back to you very soon again. Please stay well and stay with me. I really miss you (why does that always sound so much less poignant than it is?).

"I remember a letter in which I detailed to him how my neighbour in the village was pestering me with overtures of marriage: 'One of the letters I received from the village the other day was a most curious one from Heasey-Seesey, in whose rat- and cockroach-ridden house I stay when I go home, as mine is still under construction and will be for a long time because of the miserly salary I receive here at UM. The gist of his letter is nothing less than an all-out declaration of his no longer secret love for me. He claims that he has been in love with me all along but was restrained by the fact that I am too educated as a woman. Having watched me at close range since I started building in the village and going out with him now and again for palm wine, he has reached the conclusion that I am modest enough for him to consider marrying me. He envisages me marrying him and continuing with what I am doing in the city as his city wife, while he looks around for a second wife, his village wife, who will sell palm wine and bush meat on market days, and make as many children for him as God and his ancestors will. I am kindly requested to reply quickly, so that we can make good arrangements soon. (Whatever for, pray tell?) As usual, Heasey-Seesey is distressingly vague, placing the responsibility for interpreting his confusion in my hands: You are a big girl and should understand these things, he says. The only thing that he is clear about is his professed love for me. You can well imagine my astonishment. This letter now is proof again that our miscommunication is so extreme that Heasey-Seesey is not even able to perceive it.'

"Needless to say, I didn't believe that Heasey-Seesey was in love with me, or even imagined he was. He saw me as 'moni miss road', which he made clear on several occasions, including when he asked me to pay for the repair of his old black and white TV: 'Ma TV no di sick but I just want bring-am you make general check up in preparation for world cup.' Hence when I got his letter, it seemed to me like yet another desperate attempt on the part of my neighbour in the village to find a way out of his fairly destitute situation. I imagined him hoping that I had secretly entertained a longing for him all along, so that I could now marry him or at least invite him to stay with me plus enhance his prospects for the future. Understandable though this may be, it confirmed my feeling that all along Heasey-Seesey's friendship with me was solely and exclusively based on his idea that I might prove of use to him in one way or another. It still beats my imagination that it proved impossible to establish some sort of relationship based on trust, on acceptance, on mutual sharing and caring, rather than on individual interests, hidden agendas, or whatever. That concept of friendship seems so hollow to me..."

"Don't you think that there's a certain degree of personal interest or individual aims involved in every relationship?" Lilly Loveless made a rare interruption.

"Of course, there is," replied Desire, somehow irritated by the interruption. "That is probably the case in many of my own relationships. For example, my friendship with my unfortunate colleague, Dr Wiseman Lovemore, has a number of practical implications which are useful to me. Before his incarceration, we did consultancies together, we went out for a drink once in a while, and we discussed the ups and downs in our lives, and helped each other out with information and even financially from time to time. But I didn't befriend him because of these prospects: when we got to know each other, I could not even have imagined such material advantages (nor, for that matter, could he). It is because we genuinely care for each other that such developments came to be, not the other way around. And there is no 'exchange' involved, either. Because our relationship is based on mutual feelings of friendship, his 'assistance' to me and mine to him need not be repaid in any way. He benefits from my company and conversation, but I share that with him because I like him, and not because he has helped me out in other ways.

"To me, it would be surprising, but not altogether unthinkable, if Wiseman were to declare a secret love for me at some point. You can see I remain confident he is going to come out of his present difficulties and resume normal life as lecturer at the university," Desire looked up at Lilly Loveless, who nodded in solidarity

"We, Dr Wiseman Lovemore and I, know and accept each other in a way absolutely incomparable to the way in which Heasey-Seesey and I 'know' each other. If Wiseman were to say the same things that Heasey-Seesey said, I would be saddened (for him, because the feeling would not be mutual), and would try together with him to deal with the 'problem' (the problem being the discrepancy between his feelings and mine, not his feelings themselves). But in Heasey-Seesey's case, it is somewhat of an affront. Again, as so often in the past, I wonder if he really thought I'm so stupid as to believe him upfront. I wonder if he really thought I could not see through him, read between the lines, and understand the hidden requests. Did he understand them himself? And why did he expect me to pull him out of his despair as if I had no despairs of my own? It is not as though he had had no other possibilities. His uncle in the past offered to sponsor him if he wanted to further his education, but Heasey-Seesey refused the offer, claiming that he was too old to start studying. Odd fellow, indeed, Heasey-Seesey..."

"Is Heasey-Seesey still hot on you?" asked Lilly Loveless.

"He eventually gave up, married a village girl who effectively sells palm wine and bush meat on market days, but still looks across the hedge when I am in the village. I've heard his wife hates me for having behaved as if her man was not man enough."

"Really?" Lilly Loveless found it difficult to believe. "One would imagine she would be happy you left her a man to marry."

"Not at all. She feels I insulted her man, and in any case, she feels Heasey-Seesey has room enough and is man enough for at least two wives."

"Strange emotion, love," said Lilly Loveless. "Why one person leaves you cold, and another wet with desire, shall for ever remain one of the

mysteries of life.”

“It’s just like many other things in life. No two humans feel, smell, see or hear the same, and no two people have the same disposition...”

“And Sexwale, did he write back?” Lilly Loveless did not want the story to peter out. She could understand the frustrations of a woman who desires someone so much, writes and gets no response. It must be devastating to pursue someone without any indication of what his feelings are. Why was he indifferent? Was he disinterested or what? His silence and Desire’s persistence gave the impression of a horny, single woman who will climb trees to get into a man’s briefs. If the man was interested, why was he not standing up to be counted? Was he one of those who held to the falsehood that masculinity is about men being in control and measured about how they feel especially about the opposite sex in public? Privately they may die, burn with desire, but it cannot be expressed for fear of its ‘weakening’ or exposing them to vulnerability? Perhaps Desire was merely telling the story from her standpoint, and digging deeper might reveal that the man was equally restless. Even then, why is she selling herself short?

Desire took the cue: “He wrote, not much, but enough for me to keep going. I replied: ‘Dear Sexwale, I can’t tell you how relieved I was to receive your letter today – I was really in need of a little reassurance. This separation is indeed dreadfully trying, and I can well understand that the inspiration for writing has dissipated. I know I find it difficult to know what to write about, writing is just a way of filling the emptiness, of trying to reach you somehow, of trying to evoke at least a feeling of communication. If not for the prospect of you coming home, I don’t know how I would deal with this. I rest assured that you are ever on the lookout for opportunities to come to Mimboland, even if only for a week, as you say in your letter. Unfortunately, there is really no way for me coming your way right now as flights from here are as expensive as ever, but I remain focused on any possibilities, as luck, magic and miracles remain a part of life. Congratulations on the interview of which you sent me a copy – I fell in love with you all over again and am longing for you badly. Christmas seems far away and yet I’m extremely grateful that there is at least a temporary light (burning brightly!!) at the end of this very long tunnel. Please don’t succumb to exasperation or frustration, our patience will be rewarded. I hope to hear you again soon, love as always, Desire.’

“He didn’t reply. For two months, I heard nothing from him. I sent him a note that concluded with: ‘I am beginning to be seriously worried: several months have passed without word from you. Are you all right? Is something the matter? I hope it is only the postal service or your busy schedule playing havoc!’

“Then came the shock of my life. I received an envelope with photographs in provocative poses of Sexwale and the lady in red kissing Sexwale at the Corkscrew. I was terribly jealous. The handwriting on the envelope was not Sexwale’s, and there was no accompanying note either.”

“What!” screamed Lilly Loveless.

“I couldn’t contain myself. ‘Dear Sexwale,’ I wrote. ‘How difficult it is to write this letter! I have spent many an hour trying to find the best words, but I realise that straightforward honesty is the best policy: I have fallen in love with someone else. I was not planning to, was not on the lookout in the least. In fact I was feverishly longing for our reunion at Christmas, when I

was swept off my feet. What can I say? I am so very sorry to hurt you. I had been hoping to establish at Christmas how you and I could consolidate what was left of our relationship, I had hoped to find out if we could move towards a clearer commitment.”

“But was that true? Had you really fallen in love with someone else?”

“Did it matter?” asked Desire. “The writing was on the wall. Why wait to be pushed? I jumped.”

Lilly Loveless noticed the tears in her eyes, but said nothing.

Desire used the tip of her blouse to wipe the tears. “The letter did not end there,” said she. ‘I have been so very, very lonely these past two years,’ I continued, ‘waiting for opportunities to be together with you, reliving the rare but meaningful moments we had had together, and yet I had always believed that we would indeed really be together in the future, somehow, somewhere. You have been on my mind and in my heart all the time, I have missed you so painfully! But it is over now, much to my own surprise. I loved you so completely, and in a way I still do – I still long to see you, to hear you laugh, to see your eyes sparkle – but the fire is gone. This is all very confusing, but I have decided, despite my warm feelings for you, to give this new relationship a fair chance. As the past few years indicate, I am not one to fall in love easily. It is so hard to write this, not being able to see your reaction. The thought crossed my mind that you might actually be relieved; your silence over the past months has done little to provide sustenance to our relationship. But if you still cared for me the way you did here in Mimboland, I imagine you will be disappointed. I can only guess. I do hope very much that you will still want to meet in Christmas, and that you will want to be my guest in Puttkamerstown. The fact that we are no longer lovers does not mean – as far as I’m concerned – that we should lose each other completely.’ I concluded the letter and rushed it to the post.”

“Did he reply?”

“No, he didn’t, at least not immediately,” said Desire. “So I was confused. Had he received it or had he not? Not sure, I wrote to him: ‘Please, Sexwale, do respond to this letter. I am very, very sorry if I have hurt you, that was never my intention. My feelings for you have always been genuine, and my intentions sincere. We did have a good thing going, but the odds that we were up against were inhumanly strong, too. I know that you, too, suffered from our separation and were exasperated. Still, I am truly sorry that our fairy tale had to end in this harsh way. Please write back! Love, Desire.’”

Did he write back? Lilly Loveless asked with her eyes.

“Still no reply. Then one day a colleague at the department called me aside and said: “Dr Sexwale says to tell you his wife has had a baby girl.”

“How cruel!!”

“Yep, a baby girl... a little lady Sexwale” said Desire, in tears.

When she regained composure, she concluded: “The words ‘I love you’ are not to be taken lightly, in my opinion. I have rarely used them myself. They are so often used as synonyms for ‘I want to make love with you’ or ‘I feel lonely without you’, which are entirely different things. Like democracy, love is not face-powder, to be experimented with and discarded after an initial try-out, easily replaced, readily available at every corner-store, a superficial coating to be applied when the time seems right. At least, that’s the way I see things. The face-powder kind of love doesn’t interest me one bit;

it's all or nothing. If I love someone, my feelings for that person are all-encompassing and deep – even those every day words 'I love you' strike me as sadly superficial, but I'm at a loss for more suitable ones. One would have to be a real poet to express my feelings for the person I love. The completeness of my love also means I'm afraid, afraid that the feeling is not reciprocal; afraid that I might appear to be too demanding; afraid that I might overwhelm the person I love, stifle him; afraid that time and distance will make him forget our potential. It is rough to be so far away from the person one loves – there are so many things I wish to discuss when I am in love, without that clock ticking away forever in my head or the head of the person I love. When I love, I want to be able to integrate the person into my normal existence, sharing the ups and downs, trials, tribulations and happy events of day to day life. Alas, reality is harsh and unkind at times, though I know I should rather be grateful to have found someone to love at all. But then, I'd rather not love at all than love or be loved by half measures.

"Yet people won't let me live my life quietly. Everybody imagines that I am married or should be. Just before you came to stay with me, I went to a hardware store in search of built-in cupboard doors for bedrooms. First, the salesman writes 'Mrs' Desire. I am used to this because it happens all the time. He looked rather nice so I gently reminded him that I am Miss. He got the hint and apologised. I was not offended but am always surprised at people's assumption. But here is the prize assumption: as he explained the range of products, I was not interested. I knew what I wanted. He asked me for which bedroom the doors were intended. I hesitated. Then he prodded, 'the main bedroom?' No, I responded. Then he let rip. He explained that my choice was simple because for 'children's bedrooms' he had something else, easier to care for! He told me about boys and girls bedrooms. I was stupefied. I did not correct him. I made my purchase and left. So I am riveted by what I am, should be or am imagined to be by others."

Lilly Loveless put several stars against the issue in her notebook, as some of the challenges facing single or childless women in Mimbo, with the aim of comparing this with attitudes in Muzunguland.

"To conclude, I would say that passion and hope diminish with age and the wisdom that comes with the pain of experience. When the intensity of your love has been kicked around and your heart bruised by life, you learn to temper your instinctive 'Wow!' reaction with a realistic 'Arrrrrrgh!' whenever a gorgeous man catches your eye."

"Thank you very much for a very rich interview," Lilly Loveless said and closed her notebook. There was no tape to switch off, for Desire had said a firm no to Lilly Loveless's request for the interview to be tape recorded.

Lilly Loveless made some quick notes for herself. At one level, Desire's experience demonstrates that there is something attractive in not always being together with the person one loves. Don't they say the heart grows fonder with absence? So you can imagine why men and women having affairs make elaborate preparations such that each meeting is special. Because they don't often have time enough to see each other for long enough, they are more likely to package and present themselves to each other to ensure that each party gets the very best of the other. With the advent of technologies such as the Internet, Skype and webcams, intimacy can reinvent itself beyond the original confines of physical proximity, such that you don't have to be

together in the same space to drink and eat and make love together. Reality is virtual and virtuality real. What Viagra and its penetration syndrome has taken away from women, the Internet, Skype and the webcam have graciously returned in love with a touch of romance defined primarily as a state of mind. For Desire, though, these have come too late to save her relationship with Sexwale. Do these developments mean that in future for men and women to enjoy one another, they have to be far away from each other? Fortunately we are living in an era of ever accelerating mobility, real and virtual.

At another level, Lilly Loveless wrote, there was genuine reason to worry about the future of relationships driven by new technologies like digital cameras, cell phones with cameras and webcams which excite curiosity and experimentation. These technologies invite people to manipulate time and space in ways that interconnect the real and the virtual, and suggest new forms of relationships. Fantasy making and possibilities of non-contact sex are encouraged, so are new ways of having and enjoying sex. Even when time and space are not a hindrance, having sex, though desirable, is so exerting that sometimes, one saves one's energy by sitting back and just imagining pleasure. Playfully or not quite fathoming the consequences, more and more young people are videoing themselves in lurid or sexually suggestive postures which they proceed to disseminate through the Internet (YouTube) and via mobile phones. Apparently normal teenage girls, lured by celebrities who are influenced to influence by acting and dressing in overtly sexual ways and pushed by fear of social rejection and unpopularity, are posting pictures of themselves topless or dressed up in sexualized clothing in chat rooms to get attention from boys and men they have never even met, feeling the urge to perform as adults.

Does this really amount to women taking control of their sexuality, as some have suggested in the notion of 'Girls Gone Wild', as opposed to 'Girls Gone Mild'? Could it be that the celebrity women in the media on which girls and women model their behaviour, reflect an untypical emancipation which even they themselves don't practice when outside of the acting roles they assume in public and in the media? Does the fixation on sexuality not sexify women by reducing their worth to their sexual appeal? Isn't there a risk that men are led by such postings to believe that women are indifferent to being seen and treated as sex objects? But then, it could also be argued that women are simply behaving like the victims of male sexual domination that they have been brought up to be. Male interests are behind the beauty industries which though targeting women with the dreams and desires they engineer, promote and protect, are ultimately manipulating women with the diktats of manhood. However compelling the rationalizations women may give themselves for imbibing and pursuing the indicators of femininity made available by the beauty industry, making themselves beautiful is ultimately about harkening to the whims and caprices of a world under the grip of manhood.

Lilly Loveless accompanied Bobinga Iroko to Nyamandem just as she had indicated she would. However, in more than a thousand ways, the whole Nyamandem experience was surreal, to say the least. The drive to Nyamandem was mostly at night, Bobinga Iroko having insisted on leaving well before dawn, in order to arrive before office hours. He wanted to link up with the secretariat of the National Association of Mimbo Journalists to draft a formal petition to President Longstay, for the immediate and unconditional release of Dr Wiseman Lovemore and his colleagues. He had telephoned the chairman of the association to agree on a time, who had assured him that he would be waiting for him at 8am at the office. This was not an appointment to miss, so Bobinga Iroko persuaded Lilly Loveless to postpone for the return journey, which he promised would be during the day, her plan to entertain her eyes of concern with the devastating spectacle of the ever-diminishing rainforest plundered by unscrupulous logging companies with dubious credentials.

They arrived at Nyamandem well in advance, so Bobinga Iroko suggested breakfast at his favourite café on Avenue de l'Indépendance Modérée. As they sat down, Bobinga Iroko noticed a vendor with the papers of the day. He called him over. All of the newspapers with the exception of *The Talking Drum*, which Bobinga Iroko was pleasantly surprised to find in circulation in Nyamandem, carried the same front page lead story. The captions were wild, lurid and homophobic: "100 homosexuals in Mimboland, well-placed high-ranking members of society". The papers detailed a growing network of homosexuals among government and administrative officials, businessmen and women, the clergy, sportsmen and women, and in the wider society. They were mostly men hungry for power, wealth and social status, the papers claimed. "Men and women in the higher echelons of society go fishing at universities, high and secondary schools for students ready to donate their bodies to become rich overnight, to gain admission into state-run professional schools. Others seek graduates hungry for big jobs or civil servants looking for rapid promotion," one of the papers wrote.

Bobinga Iroko bought all of the papers, three copies of each. "This is explosive stuff," he told Lilly Loveless. "Soon, the government is going to ban the papers if it hasn't already, and the traffic in photocopies at double or triple the price will begin." He handed Lilly Loveless a copy of each.

As she perused the newspapers, she came by one with a front page picture of a face she believed she had seen before.

"I think I have seen this man before," he showed Bobinga Iroko the front page in question.

"That's Honourable Epicure Bilingue," said Bobinga Iroko, "maverick politician, member of parliament and of government with a taste for new ways of quenching old thirsts. He is the one at the heart of the homosexual allegations splattered in the press. Isn't it he who reportedly sodomised the young man who fell to a shattering death from the balcony of the 13th floor of Hotel Avaravar? You know him? How? Where? When?"

"I'm not sure," said Lilly Loveless, but I believe I've seen the face somewhere." Just then it struck her. "Wait a minute." She opened her

handbag and took out a complimentary card. "You see," she showed Bobinga Iroko the card. "I was convinced I had seen him somewhere. I travelled with him on the same flight when I was coming to Mimboland. He was sitting right next to me, and gave me his card, insisting I change my fieldwork location from Puttkamerstown to Nyamandem where everything that matters happens."

"Perhaps you would have saved him this public embarrassment if you had listened to him," said Bobinga Iroko, jokingly.

Lilly Loveless didn't comment, but read on, her curiosity suddenly caught by the story of Honourable Epicure Bilingue, a man she knew.

This particular paper went on and on about what they termed "this social ill" that was creeping in and threatening to destroy the social fabric of good morals in Mimboland. It named Honourable Epicure Bilingue as the ring leader of "this network of perversion that is spreading like wildfire, corrupting morals across the land of Mimbo." Even before the shocking death of the young man that ignited the press like dogs of war, it was thanks to his wife's frustrations with his homosexual activities that the Bishop of Nyamandem had learnt of the matter during confessions, and tipped off the press to go adigging, an exercise that had taken the female investigative journalist, Husana Homely, to "Dens of Perversion that make Sodom and Gomorrah look like pre-historic child's play". Husana Homely, whose piece was titled "Honourable Epicure Bilingue ou le Sexe de l'Etat", expounded the virtues of the investigative journalism that had lead her paper in particular to uncover the network, and appealed to all journalists to stick together as the conscience of the nation against the immorality and illegality of homosexuality. Journalists, she wrote, had a duty of joining hands with other morally upright forces in society to curb the rising assault on marriage and good family life by "ills such as homosexuality, paedophilia, pornography and debasement of women". She concluded: "The current trends, if uncurbed, would push the dark side of sex to the ridiculous limits of selfishness, pride, and demonic destructiveness, leaving every normal person in the hands of fear and foreboding."

The land of Mimbo was under the grip of a new erotic movement, Husana Homely wrote, which consisted of men doing it with men, women with women, and the insatiable superstars amongst them with beasts as well. This "sexualité avancée", she continued, is the real "bilinguisme national", and it wasn't an accident that none other than the Honourable Epicure Bilingue should be at its forefront. Thanks to him and "the perversions he promotes", shops in Nyamandem were now overflowing with what she termed "diapers for adults" intended "to take care of men whose anal muscles have taken early retirement due to intense and reckless activity in horizontal jogging as the penultimate form of nation-building." Tongue in cheek, Husana Homely called for the police, if there were still some left worth the name and honour, "to institute compulsory searches of underwear in public places, to identify and take necessary measures against adults wearing diapers." She wondered if others had noticed as she did that "a strange breed of fat, dark flies has invaded the city and are particularly drawn to men wearing diapers."

Lilly Loveless couldn't understand why there should be this much of a stigma around the use of adult diapers in Mimboland, when this was such a

common practice where she came from. It isn't homosexuals who have weak anal muscles. The old, the handicapped and people with genetic disorders regularly use diapers.

When Lilly Loveless was through with reading the piece on Honourable Epicure Bilingue, she asked Bobinga Iroko for his opinion on such homophobia.

By way of an answer, he shared with her his experiences during his years in an all-boys boarding secondary school, experiences that were similar to those of his sister who went to an all-girls school in Zintgraffstown. If those experiences meant anything, then homosexuality has always had its place in Mimboland, named or unnamed, accepted or not. He remembered how five boys were dismissed from his school for inappropriate sexual acts. One of the boys, the leader, was a form five student who had developed a weird habit of always going about with thick toilet tissue paper, inviting unsuspecting others to play hide and seek with him in secluded corridors and nearby bushes, and rewarding those who obliged with exotic biscuits, sweets and other goodies which his parents brought back for him from their frequent visits to Muzunguland. He, Bobinga Iroko, would have been dismissed as well, had he not been a step ahead of the guy. As is common practice in secondary schools in Mimboland, boys and girls invite their friends to share their beds in a brotherly or sisterly sort of way, "to keep warm or because of fear to sleep alone." Friendlier than most other students Bobinga Iroko knew, the student had shown him he liked him a lot. At the refectory, he took care of Bobinga Iroko's food when the latter was late. On outings, he brought back sweets and biscuits and other goodies which he shared with Bobinga Iroko. As a senior student and prefect, he made sure that Bobinga Iroko, although quite a troublesome student, escaped punishment even when guilty. During preps, he would usually insist on coming to study with Bobinga Iroko, and as they shared the same dormitory, at night he would either ask Bobinga Iroko to join him in his bed or insist on joining Bobinga Iroko in his.

Naïve as he was about these things in those days, Bobinga Iroko would innocently yield, until one day when the boy started touching him in sensitive places in ways more than inspired by a simple desire to be friendly. "I jumped and ran as fast as my tiny legs could take me," concluded Bobinga Iroko. "Although I felt too embarrassed to tell anyone what had happened, I did understand my sister when she violently protested about going back to school because of what she referred to then as "the weird things that take place between girls." It was and still is commonplace to surprise girls making love with one another in college toilets, and when sleeping over in sisterly fashion, "a practice not helped by the fact that most parents frown on their daughters getting anywhere near the opposite sex". Lifting up his head like someone at a confessional, he said, "This is why, to be frank with you, I have nothing against homosexuals as such, but I do have something against using it as a pretext to compound the injustices and impunity that have eaten into our social fabric as a cankerworm of white ants."

"That's a very respectable opinion," said Lilly Loveless.

What Bobinga Iroko did not say was how his years in a boarding school had disciplined him sexually in ways that had made him focus his attention masterfully on his studies in his subsequent university years and early working life. This he couldn't tell her without telling her as well about

Godlove and Loveline... about Ndolo and her tragic death in child birth... a chapter he had decided not to revisit if he could help it, about...

Bobinga Iroko and Lilly Loveless were through with their breakfast and with reading about Honourable Epicure Bilingue and the rising homosexual movement he was alleged to lead and they were about to take off when Bobinga Iroko's cell phone rang. It was the president of the National Association of Mimbo Journalists calling to cancel their appointment. There was an emergency, he informed Bobinga Iroko. The morning's homophobic articles in the newspapers had set loose the republican rottweilers, to savage the guilty journalists and destroy their "feuilles des choux". Journalists were flying helter skelter, and it was hardly a proper time to convene a meeting to petition the bruised President Longstay and his inner cabinet.

If Bobinga Iroko had listened to the radio, he would have heard President Longstay "castigating journalists for digging into people's private lives," for bringing the state and its institutions into disrepute and for making complete nonsense of the social responsibility expected of them and their profession. How could such irresponsible journalism be allowed the space and time to adulterate the moral image of the government? Who were the forces behind this calculated attempt to weaken state institutions and endanger republican peace? The Ministers of The Homeland and of Communication must either put their houses in order or face the consequences of their competence, warned President Longstay. This was a call to war that no journalist in their right senses could afford to ignore, so he the president of the National Association of Mimbo Journalists was telephoning Bobinga Iroko from the way to his home village, where he intended to lie low until the situation had calmed down. "It is dangerous to be right when the government is wrong," he told Bobinga Iroko, adding that if Bobinga Iroko had any brains, the sensible thing to do was to make an about turn and drive out of town until further notice.

Being the Doubting Thomas that he was by nature and training, Bobinga Iroko decided to find out if the president of the association was indeed not at his office and had simply found an excuse to wriggle his way out of the petition. Only when he drove to the office, did he believe his colleague. There were four soldiers armed to the teeth with AK-47s, batons, knives, hand grenades, walkie-talkies and cell phones, keeping guard at the gate, while the police were inside the building ransacking offices. It was then that Bobinga Iroko made an about turn and drove until Hotel Sept Collines, where they checked in for three days.

It was during the three days that Lilly Loveless got a lot of anecdotes related to her study, mostly from Mariette, the girl at the bar with whom it did not take long to create a rapport and giggle away as she drank her Mimbo-Wanda. Some of the anecdotes she was able to verify when she went out driving around the massive hilly city with Bobinga Iroko. On their first night, they were driving past the town hall in the city centre, when two girls dressed to expose all that they ought to be concealing, rushed to their car as Bobinga Iroko appeared to slow down, only to be disappointed upon seeing Lilly Loveless seated by him. With typical aggression and disdain, they threw insults at Lilly Loveless for standing in the way of their business, as they would do with every woman in her situation. Just as the girls turned away, it was the turn of two young men. They walked up to the car and asked

Bobinga Iroko if he wanted them for the night.

"What for?" he asked.

"Anything you want," said one.

"I already have all I want with my wife," he turned to Lilly Loveless who smiled her cooperation.

"You don't know what you are missing," said the other.

"What could I possibly be missing?" asked Bobinga Iroko.

"New dimensions of doing everything," replied the one, smiling.

"You speak eloquently," remarked Bobinga Iroko. "New dimensionally eloquent," he added with a playful smile.

"Why shouldn't I?" retorted the young man. "What do you expect of a university graduate?"

"Graduate? ...You?" Bobinga Iroko sounded incredulous.

"I can see you don't live in Nyamandem," said the other.

"How do you know?" asked Bobinga Iroko.

"From your naïveté," the young men said, turned and rushed to another car that had just pulled up. Moments later they got into the car, which drove off.

Lilly Loveless and Bobinga Iroko exchanged glances but not a word.

They were back at Hotel Sept Collines in time to catch a glimpse of the Minister of Forced Arms whom Bobinga Iroko knew well by reputation. It was he whose son, a close friend of President Longstay's very own legitimate firstborn son, was rumoured to benefit each time his friend bought a new Ferrari because he could not remember where he parked his last one. The minister was rumoured to be often animated by such hungry desires that he could eat his tongue. Known to take his lunch in hotel rooms in the form of quickies, he was a soft target for many a journalist. Last year a newspaper published the following confession by a girl who was seeing him for regular quickies, and who disappeared without trace since the publication: "Once he called from downstairs to make sure I already had my clothes off and instructed me on the position in which he expected to find me. His bodyguard waited outside the hotel room door. The Honourable Minister of Forced Arms would take work-related cell phone calls in the midst of our lunchtime activities. Many of them ended with 'I'll deal with that when I finish with lunch.' He had some weird rituals. Every now and then, he would take my hand and bring it to his lips for a kiss. Afterwards he would jerk his head back saying, 'What do you want to do, break my tooth?' To which I would reply: 'But you're the one who grabbed my hand and thrust it up toward your mouth!'"

As recently as a month or so ago, another newspaper published an article on alleged incest the minister had committed with his daughter in a bid to stay super-glued to power. When questioned by his family why on earth he would do a thing like that, the minister is said to have replied: "Where do you think all the money I give you comes from?...I have to fulfil certain conditions to keep my position." The tall, imposing and disproportionately shaped minister, known to feel something on his everywhere and to mount anything that moves like a veritable equal opportunities f**ker is so attractive that he is always followed by flies like a child who has forgotten to clean himself after excreting. He was waiting for the hotel lift with a well-built, well-tattooed, ear-ringed young man in tight

fitting jeans and a T-Shirt that exposed his impressive weightlifter-like biceps. His plump dancing derriere turned a few eyes. Bobinga Iroko and Lilly Loveless overheard him saying: "I've the entire Forced Arms at my command, but the only territory I want to conquer just now is the deep dark valley between these round brown hills. Jeune homme... lead me to your river and take me deep into your territory..."

Bobinga Iroko thought to himself: Only a mission this urgent could take the Minister of Forced Arms away from the emergency our homophobic press has imposed on the government he under serves while servicing his appetites.

That night, Lilly Loveless stayed up late to spend more time with Mariette, listening to anecdotes. Mariette told her about a young woman of about 25 years old, very well dressed, who drove a luxury car and parked at the Central Market, not far from where Hotel Sept Collines was situated. She made her way slowly towards a refuse dump, undressed herself completely, went down on all fours, buried her mouth completely in the refuse dump, and started barking like a dog. A tantalized crowd gathered round her shocked with questioning eyes. Through, the woman quietly dressed herself up again, entered her car and drove off, as if nothing had happened.

According to Mariette, more and more strange things are happening in Nyamandem, as people are into all sorts of strange cults demanding occult practices. Illicit enrichment and ambitions of power and wealth through magical or occult means are pushing people to madden reality with abnormal behaviour.

She told Lilly Loveless of a similar occurrence, this time at Marché Lologo, in broad day light. A very beautiful young girl with an excellent build, drives up in a Toyota RAV4, which she parks, and comes out with bananas in her hand. After peeling a banana, she lies down by the pavement and starts inserting it into her womanhood. She is completely deaf to all the screams and expression of shocked surprise by a bustling market. Through, she stands up, makes her way back to her car, and drives off.

Similarly, a very rich and beautiful woman every midday drives out of town, parks her car and goes into a farm. One day three Peeping Toms follow her out of curiosity. She parks her latest Mercedes, goes onto the farm, goes under a big tree, puts out a cloth, undresses and lies down naked, her legs spread out. In a couple of minutes, a big dark smooth snake slides down graciously from the tree and enters her fully. She screams and cries with the pleasure of pain, as they make love like normal people, wriggling and giggling as she climaxes. When it is over and the snake retires, she keels over and starts vomiting money. Then she picks up the money and her clothes, dresses up, goes happily back to her car and drives home smiling money.

"I'm inclined to think that in both cases it was the marabout or medicine man who asked these ladies to do something like that," guessed Mariette. "It isn't uncommon for marabouts to ask people to do strange things in broad daylight or at night in order to have power, wealth or whatever they want. We live in strange times..."

It is the heart of the night. A woman has hired a taxi and asked him to drive round the city with her. After an hour of driving around in this curious manner, the driver asks the woman where exactly she wants him to take her. He thought that she was probably disturbed from the fugitive manner in

which she kept looking out of the window. It was then that the woman revealed to him that she absolutely needed to make love with a madman before the crack of dawn to stay alive. Full of goodwill, the taxi man commits himself to help her out. He starts a race against time, visiting all the corners of the city which he knew madmen to frequent at night. But that was not a night like the others, as the madmen seemed mysteriously to have disappeared from where he ordinarily would meet them. By dawn, the result was zero mad man. Resigned to her fate, the young woman thanked the taxi man for his assistance all the same, paid him MIM\$50000 for the hire, and disappeared into the heart of dawn to assume her brutal fate.

Mariette was certain that this was a clear case of a secret cult, which, as is traditional with such sinister groups, had asked her to make an impossible sacrifice. Her failure to fulfil her commitments meant the ultimate sacrifice of all – her life.

She was full of anecdotes, Mariette, and as long as Lilly Loveless had room for Mimbo-Wanda and in her notebook, she was ready to keep going. Her favourite anecdote, judging from the hearty manner in which she laughed at the end of telling it, was about the misadventures of a well-placed family man in the residential area of Ndondon. This man, hungry for something, went out to a nightclub in his neighbourhood after persuading his wife and children to take a holiday to their home village. At the nightclub, the man identified a young person whom he persuaded to accompany him to a hotel. Once at the hotel, the young person persuaded the man to penetrate him from the anus, as this was more pleasurable. Surprised by this unusual sexual preference, the man hesitated, but curiosity pushed him to go long all the same. But when the young person unaddressed, the man realized to his consternation that it was actually a young man that he was dealing with. In blind fury, he attacked the young man and beat him up mercilessly, then ran out of the hotel, forgetting to settle his bills. The next day, the police were after him with burning questions following a report by the young man, of indecent assault and sodomy. But as these things happen, not long after receiving compensation for a crime that was not committed, the young man was arrested by the police in the neighbourhood of the town hall for attacking and fatally wounding another young man whom he said was his lover, but whom he caught propositioning a female prostitute, something he couldn't forgive.

Mariette said it was increasingly common, the phenomenon of young male prostitutes interested mainly in men, but also in women, "like a door that opens in all directions." It was the trend, she confessed, "not because I want to moralise", she added, "but because of the context and circumstances in which they do what they do." According to her, given the high level of unemployment and the excruciating misery engineered by chronic poverty, such young men desperate to make ends meet have little control over their bodies, and are dictated to by those with money and the power to give value. "And as you know, he or she who pays the piper calls the tune, and uncultured as they are, the paymasters of Mimboland call the most bizarre and satanic of tunes. They are filthy in their habits and lack the discipline that comes with wealth well-earned and well-tamed. Also, they are deep in superstition, believing everything their marabouts, diviners and cults tell them to do or not to do, which are usually filthy, degrading and debasing of

all that is human, virtuous and civilised. The result is that the young men and women entrapped, humbled and humiliated by the money they falsely claim to be theirs, become moving lethal reservoirs of all sorts of impurities of the flesh and the soul, which is why more and more people have taken up the habit of smelling in strange ways..."

Lilly Loveless made sure she took down every single word, to chew and digest later.

Mariette's next anecdote was about a young woman who, suspecting her husband of having an affair with his secretary decides to surprise him at his office where he stays late on the pretext of work. At the office, she finds her husband effectively has company. Convinced that it is the woman of her suspicions, she opens the door abruptly only to find herself face to face with an incredible scene. Her husband is in full action, not with the secretary as she thought, but rather with another man, her husband's boss to whom she has always gone to complain about his infidelity.

Was it a coincidence that many of Mariette's anecdotes centred on homosexual encounters and relationships? Lilly Loveless could see a copy of one of the homophobic newspapers lying on one of the tables, and was sure that Mariette had read it. She was also sure that Mariette had overheard what the Minister of Forced Arms said, but to what extent did this condition her choice of anecdotes? Whatever the case, Lilly Loveless was pleased with the stories she was getting, as her research demanded that she captured as representative a picture as possible.

Mariette continued. At Beverly Hills, the poshest residential area in Nyamandem, a young man out for a walk with his sister remarks on car following them without overtaking, although they are walking very slowly. Convinced that whoever is driving the car is interested in his sister, he decides to walk away leaving his sister behind, in order to allow the man room to act. But the driver, instead of following the young girl, bypasses her and heads for and beckons at the young man to come. Surprised but curious, the young man approaches. It is then that the man behind the steering takes out a wad of banknotes and tenders to him saying: "This money is all yours, if you accept to follow me to a hotel and to pass the night there with me." Believing to have misunderstood the man, the young man asks: "What am I going to do with you in a hotel? Do you need me to be present in order to have a good time with my sister?" The man replied: "Your sister is pretty but it is you I want. If you come along, I'm ready to give you much more."

As is typical with such anecdotes, Mariette couldn't say whether or not the young man went along to the hotel. Their greatness came from the fact that everyone is allowed to conclude them the way they want, thus ensuring that they are constantly reborn. Lilly Loveless thought that researchers were no different from the general public that consumed these anecdotes; only the interpretations they brought to bear differed.

A young girl, after a misunderstanding with her parents, leaves the family home to take up temporary refuge with a lady friend of the family. One night, while sleeping, she feels a hand slip under the sheets to squeeze her chest. She wakes up with a start to find herself face to face with her host, and screams. The host orders her to shut up and says: "Why do you pretend to be surprised? You should have expected this, for it is some months now since I revealed my intentions to your mother. After all, why do you think she

never opposed the idea of you coming to stay with me?"

There is a member of the presidential guard, who was forced to go back home shortly after assuming duty at 6pm because of illness. Upon reaching home, he knocks in vain, his wife seemingly dead asleep. Worried, he decides to use his own keys to enter the house. From the parlour, he can hear noise emanating from his bedroom. Remembering that a lady friend of his wife has the habit of coming to stay the night in his absence, he reassures himself thinking that they are simply chatting away. But when he opens the curtains, he is shocked to find them spread out in his conjugal bed, caressing each other intimately.

A young girl was sitting at the biggest hotel in town, having a drink when a Muzungu man came up and offered her a drink, and then invited her to his room. Interested, the young lady accepted. Once in the room, she found another girl whom she recognised as another high class prostitute. The man reassured them, went into a connecting room and returned with what looked like a digital camera. Surprised to find the young girls still dressed, he asked them to take off their clothes and lie on the carpet, which they did. Then he approached, took the hand of the one and placed it between the legs of the other. Astonished, one of the girls protested. Putting her reaction down to an attempt to earn more, the man reassured her and went back into the adjoining room. While he was gone, the second girl asked the one who protested: "What has come over you to react in this way? Is this the first time that you are doing a thing like this? Me, I've often done it, and frankly, it is not at all unpleasant. And, in any case, what's your business whether it's pleasant or not? Aren't we there for the money? For me, there's no question, and I'm ready for all it takes to earn the money. It is not every day that one has the luck to stumble on a man so disposed to paying such a high price just for the pleasure of seeing two girls caressing each other, so please, cooperate."

There is this woman, Miss Helena Paradise, who went to Muzunguland to study, returned without a degree but with a business idea that has blossomed and expanded her horizons beyond her wildest dreams, making of her one of the richest women in Mimboland in less than five years of starting the business and at barely the age of 34. She started young with men, very young, and matured fast as well. At the age of 12 she had her first serious boyfriend, a police inspector. At 15 she got rid of her first pregnancy through a backstreet D&C, which gave her reason to hate policemen with a passion: 'He broke my virginity, used me for three years, got me pregnant and dumped me.' At 20 she was going out with the Minister of Money who embezzled like a bulldozer. It was this minister who, having drunk and licked every single drop of her love nectar, and having offered her a mansion in recognition, decided, mostly out of feelings of jealousy and insecurity over the possibility that she could be charmed by someone with more than money to offer, to whisk her off to Muzunguland for further studies, without as much as stopping to think, further studies of what? But he did not stay long enough to bother about unasked and unanswered questions. He was axed by President Longstay, and with that almighty presidential decree went all his privileges and delusions of wealth, power, visibility, virility and invincibility. And just how did he imagine that Miss Helena Paradise, whom he knew only because he was a powerful man with infinite access to the commonwealth of Mimboland, would still continue to regard him with respect and availability?

When she wouldn't answer his calls, reply to emails or open her door when he visited, he couldn't handle it, and died like the rat that he was, by suicide. Miss Helena Paradise refused to feel guilty and responsible. "*L'homme ne fait pas femme, femme fait elle-même*", she reminded herself, and carried on as if the Minister of Money had never existed. She had met a woman who touched things in her she never knew were there before. In her new circles, she kept saying: "There was a time when men were great, but men are now out of date".

When Helena Paradise was coming back from Muzunguland, she imported many containers filled with various sex toys. Once on the ground, she set up a club for women only in Nyamandem and Sawang, which she advertised as a Gym and Yoga Club, but which in reality teaches women sex techniques and how to have orgasms. She is hailed in women's circles like a goddess for all she has done to increase the female libido where men have failed woefully or simply fallen by the wayside. Mariette swore she was speaking from experience, having registered in this club when she was not enjoying sex with her boyfriend.

Most of those who frequent the club are the wives of very well placed men of power and wealth too busy to make possible the joy of being enjoyed or simply not as sweet and open-handed in pleasuring as they often are with their wallets. (Hence the constant reference to the club as 'dating company for married women' on radio trottoir.) Quite wrongly, these men think that money and pampering with material abundance can offset the emotional pain caused by sexual neglect. Although they spend a fortune on basic maintenance of their looks and succeed in defying the impact of age with cosmetics and other anti-ageing incentives, their men seem blind to their sexual needs. They feel like parked cars in forgotten garages needing to recharge their batteries that have gone flat for want of drives. Yet, as Miss Helena Paradise puts it, "doctors recommend weekly sex as a tonic against colds, flu, headache and bad moods, as a beauty treatment, and as useful in burning calories, keeping the menstrual cycle regular, preventing accidents and solving marital problems." The fascinating thing about coming to her club is that women start coming regularly.

Not being sure about the identities or motives of all those who come to register, Miss Helena Paradise imposes a pre-condition that all her clients must wear identical masks, offered to them upon arrival at the club. So when every client arrives, she is asked to undress and to wear a mask before proceeding to the big hall where Miss Helena Paradise, the proprietress, delivers her practical lessons. She promises and delivers to perfection ways and means of G-spot amplification for women who complain of decreased sensitivity or who have quite simply never known the pleasures of effective self-discovery.

To prove that she was telling the truth, Mariette lent Lilly Loveless for the night, the little notebook in which she took down important tips or quotes when she was registered at the club. Lilly Loveless was grateful for the book, which she promised to return first thing in the morning.

The last anecdote Mariette shared with Lilly Loveless was the story of a man who wanted to have relations with his fiancé, before marriage. The fiancée, who was busy struggling to end a secret but long term relationship with another woman, convinced him to wait saying: 'Don't , once we're

married I'll show you the brouette mimbolandaise.' The man was so curious about the 'brouette mimbolandaise' that he asked a girlfriend what it was. She hit him on the face and sent him scrambling when she heard the question. This made him even more curious to know about the 'brouette mimbolandaise,' so he decided to visit a prostitute. Once alone with her he said: 'Listen, I'm willing to pay you whatever you want, as long as you do the brouette mimbolandaise on me.' She was appalled by his words and did the same as his friend had, slapping his face and tossing him out onto the street. Even more eager to satisfy his curiosity, he decided he would just have to marry his fiancée earlier than planned. After the wedding and the wedding celebrations, they were headed to Ndolo beach where they were to stay for three days for their honeymoon. On their way, they had a car accident. The groom died immediately, before he could experience the 'brouette mimbolandaise.'

"What is 'brouette mimbolandaise'?" asked Lilly Loveless, full of curiosity.

"Who knows?" said Mariette. "He died before finding out, and I don't want to be next."

"That sounds mysterious and scary."

"Mimboland is a mysterious and scary place, and Nyamandem the capital," Mariette rubbed the pepper of fright in.

"So I see," said Lilly Loveless. She stood up, wished Mariette good night, and retired to her room.

On their last but one day in Nyamandem, Bobinga Iroko proposed to Lilly Loveless that they go out for a drink and a meal at his favourite Liberty Bar at Carrefour de la Joie, but she declined, saying she was rather tired and would prefer to eat at the hotel, converse more with Mariette, and have an early night. So Bobinga Iroko went alone.

Lilly Loveless had asked Mariette for an extension with the notebook, having fallen asleep soon after leaving the bar the other day. The material was of interest, and she wanted to type as much of it as possible on her laptop. Some of the quotes were very familiar, obviously from feminist literature, which Miss Helena Paradise had strung together to suit her Mimboland clientele. The title of the notebook was a quote by Miss Helena Paradise. It read: 'If your partners took care of business, I'd be out of business.' Amongst the quotes she typed out were those which Miss Helena Paradise always uses to introduce her sessions: 'The best thing about sex is that there is no right or wrong way to do it'; 'Husbands and lovers will come and go, but my relationship with myself would always be'; 'Masturbation, the ongoing love affair that each of us has with herself'; 'Today I have a date with myself. Masturbation is a date with self love'; 'Masturbation is liberating, so don't feel ashamed of it, celebrate it'; 'What we all have in common is we all want better orgasms'; 'Pent up sexual tension is finally released when we have an orgasm'; 'Did you know that some women have some of their best orgasms riding a bike or a horse?'; 'Many women under quick finish pressures fake orgasms'; and a woman who used the vibrator for the first time and had multiple orgasms after five years of a difficult marriage because of sexual tensions was noted as having said: 'I wish my orgasms would come more easily with my husband.' On sex toys Miss Helena Paradise urges: 'Embrace new dimensions of coming. Don't just come once, come three, four ... many

times.' Then she reassures: 'It is nonsense that once you've used one you won't want the real thing. Sex toys, not diamonds, are a girl's best friend.'

Miss Helena Paradise invites her clients to breathe deeply, and to practice feeling more comfortable in their bodies: 'Because so much of our bodies as women are hidden and internal, many of us don't know ourselves'; 'Spend quality time getting to know yourself'; 'Don't be afraid to experiment'; 'Turn the temperature to let's get naked and experiment'; 'Linger over various body parts and make a mental note of parts that kick start you'; 'Use a lubricant to enhance sensation'; 'Remember that for a vast majority of us the clitoris is the main pleasure centre and the brain the most important pleasure organ'; 'Regular self pleasuring would increase your desire'; 'Explore your sexual fantasies – sex starts in your head, with sight, sound, smell and creative imagination'; 'temporarily holding back provides for a final explosion'; 'Men rush in, rush out: most men we come across seem to think that sex is a sort of race they've got to be through with as soon as possible – short, sharp and like lightning. It is up to us women to show them what pleasures there are in taking things slowly'; 'Once you know what you like and learn how to press your own buttons, you can show others how to press them for you'; 'It takes two to tango, but only a woman's knowledge of her body and mind to be truly in charge'; 'Women unlike men know that it is not the men in your life that counts, it is the life in your men'; Men like to think you need something big inside you to be having a good time. They love doing the same old thing the same old way'; 'Penetration needn't always be the main course. It could be the starter or the dessert as well. There's a lot more on the menu than a supplemented or enhanced male package with a few additional inches of hard flesh'; 'Given the right moves, no woman can resist having a good time'; 'Try asking him to get versatile with his tongue by writing all the letters of the alphabet on your vulva with his tongue. Can he reach O before your orgasm?'; 'Unlike men, women can keep coming'; 'A lover should be like a soul mate who knows what you are thinking before you think it. You need such a person to give you fire'; 'Tell your men: the more you can make a girl come the more she's going to want to please you'; 'Periods are a woman's way of seeing off a man who hasn't made you pregnant'; 'Women are learning to call the shots the female way. They can do whatever they put their minds to and take total control of their lives'; 'We no longer have to be imitation men to have self confidence'; 'Women make love to be romantic, men are romantic to make love'; 'After sex, resist the urge to roll over and read a magazine or something. Try to share a shower, pillow talk...' And she always ends her sessions with: 'If love is the strongest human emotion and sex the most powerful force in human life, isn't it but normal to get both right? Practice makes perfect. And as the people along the African Nile say: 'Once you've drunk from the River Nile, you will return to drink again and again'..."

It's hardly surprising that Miss Helena Paradise has struck it rich in Mimboland, where women believe a man is yours only when on top of you, Lilly Loveless told herself. Her lessons are not meant only for women wanting to break free of repressive relationships with men. They are meant as well for women seeking to improve their relationships with men. Hence her multiple tips to couples: ranging from how to use various sexual positions (missionary, rear entry, shallow thrust; cat technique, spoons/standing on

location, reverse cowgirl, love boat, etc.) to good effect, to what to do to turn on or to keeping your partner going (blindfolding partners who are shy of their bodies; polishing the top of the penis with the palm of the hand; breast play; palm circles; lip service; exploration with the tongue; and taking long journeys of foreplay).

Two or three hours after Bobinga Iroko went out, Lilly Loveless heard his door, just next to hers, close. He was with someone, she could tell from the laughing voices. Apparently he had found what he thought he needed for the evening, thought Lilly Loveless. The boisterousness continued for some time. A while later, she heard his door open and close again. She imagined that activity there had thus ceased.

Through with typing from Mariette's notebook, Lilly Loveless went to knock on Bobinga Iroko's door, only to have it opened by a fully dressed woman. She hadn't left yet after all. Lilly Loveless could hear the sound of water. While waiting for Bobinga Iroko to finish his shower or whatever, Lilly Loveless asked, "What kind of work is this for a beautiful girl like you? Why do you do it?"

She looked deeply into Lilly Loveless' eyes briefly. At that same moment Bobinga Iroko stepped out of the shower with a towel around his waist, and stood between the girls and the door.

She disengaged Lilly Loveless' eyes and gently pushed Bobinga Iroko aside so she could get through the door. The girl gone, Lilly Loveless turned her attention to Bobinga Iroko. "I'm sorry," she uttered.

"Not to," said Bobinga Iroko. "There are others where I found her."

Lilly Loveless felt totally misunderstood. She felt like exploding. But she kept her madness in check, somehow. She wondered what manner of man he was. She had come to think of Bobinga Iroko as someone who took delight in twisting the meaning of things. She felt like calling him "a postmodernist fundamentalist" whose passion for text beyond context seeks to show the many readings or listenings possible to any text or conversation, thereby creating utter chaos in meaning. Often with Bobinga Iroko, she did not understand whether to continue in a witty, satirical vein, withdraw, or take him on in his flights of fancy and imaginations.

"Why do you make life so complicated when you can simply breathe in and out and things are equally OK? I suppose it makes people wonder which part of you they want to listen to, hear or feel. Do you deliberately choose to be complicated?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea what you are talking about," replied Bobinga Iroko, a mischievous smile on his face.

This further infuriated her.

After watching some news together in hostile silence, Lilly Loveless could not stand the tension, so she stormed out back to her room. She showered, put on a loose fitting kaba made for sleeping by 'Desired Dresses' – Britney's tailor, and went out on the balcony to get a bit of fresh hair and think about what had just happened next door.

Hands posed on the rail of the balcony's edge, Lilly Loveless began to take in the evening. And what did she see? That the street along this side of the hotel was empty – except for a lone woman standing on the other side looking directly up. She was bringing the fingers of her outstretched hand toward her several times in quick succession, as if she were calling for Lilly

Loveless to come. Lilly Loveless put her hand to her chest with a questioning look, and she nodded.

With a spirit of anxiety but mainly of curiosity, Lilly Loveless changed out of the kaba, back into her trousers and light green button up shirt, also made by Britney's tailor, the man who sews for women who want to be women, look like women, feel like women. She walked apprehensively, yet eagerly down the stairs, out the front door of the hotel, and turned right. The woman was still there. And sure enough, it was the girl who had been with Bobinga Iroko earlier that evening. What did she want with Lilly Loveless?

She told Lilly Loveless her name was Dujamaisvu. Lilly Loveless didn't say anything. The girl fumbled in her pocket for a pack of cigarettes. She took a cigarette and lit it quickly.

Lilly Loveless said, "No, with me you don't smoke."

She paused, threw the lit cigarette to the ground, stamped it out and looked a little incredulously at Lilly Loveless. "You don't know me that well, to hate me that much," said she.

"I don't hate you," protested Lilly Loveless. "It's smoking I don't like."

"You know how many men I have let kiss me and sleep with me just because they have money in their wallets – men with filthy arms, dirty hearts and holes in their souls, men who stink like hell, men who make you feel cheap and soiled?"

Lilly Loveless listened in silence and with contemplative attention.

"Men who think they are doing me a favour by sleeping with me, since in their eyes I am a girl who would do anything for money."

Lilly Loveless' curiosity surged. "So why do you sleep with men for money, like you just did with Bobinga Iroko?"

"Oh, he's not a man, that one," said Dujamaisvu. "You..." and she engaged Lilly Loveless' eyes again, like she did in Bobinga Iroko's hotel room briefly, "...you are a man."

Lilly Loveless raised her eyes in wonderment.

"Why do you say that?"

"What do you make of a man who invites you to his room, pays you and says, 'I don't want to make love to you, I only want to get close to you.'?"

"So tell me your story," Lilly Loveless asked.

Dujamaisvu began. "Girls like us never really get what we want. We take what we are given... I was brought up like most decent girls... Hardly could I ever have imagined that one day I'd be reduced to cleaning toilets or selling my body like a public toilet..."

Lilly Loveless was all ears, only digressing once in a while to digest the scene in Bobinga Iroko's room.

"...so as you see, the world of prostitution is like the bait fishermen use to lure fish to their hooks. First, poverty brings you knocking on the door of prostitution as a temporary respite. Then, before you know it, you are completely sucked in. If there's little money forthcoming, you stick in there for the crumbs and in the hope of meeting Father Christmas some day. If there's money, you become so used to earning it this way that you lose faith in all your other abilities to earn money in a another manner. Your normal activities suffer, as do your normal relationships. People use you and dump

you as if you were filth, and before you know it, you start believing you are filth," concluded Dujamaisvu.

Listening to the girl's story took her words away. When she recovered her tongue, Lilly Loveless asked, "Have you been back to your village?"

"No," said Dujamaisvu, "not once in the last three years have I been there. School is challenging, and raising money for fees and subsistence even more so. All I know how to do is take off my clothes, and this doesn't even bring in much to make ends meet."

Lilly Loveless' mind flashed back to the exclusive mail clubs back home in Bruhlville where she lap and strip danced, and felt herself in the shoes of this woman, whose name she couldn't quite bring herself to call.

"Do you want to go back?" asked Lilly Loveless.

Dujamaisvu looked searchingly, then said dreamily with a faraway look in her eyes, "I would like to see my mom, and sisters and brothers and cousins and above all, by son..."

"Well, you can't not go back. Shouldn't you visit them?" Lilly Loveless asked, almost feeling the girl's pain of separation from loved ones.

They talked on and on ... until Dujamaisvu said, "Why don't we continue talking in your room?"

Surprised, Lilly Loveless thought of quickly stamping out the possibility, but when she opened her mouth, the only words that came out were "Why not?"

In the morning, Lilly Loveless pushed the girl to leave early, but her heart was reluctant to go with her. When Lilly Loveless accompanied her out of the hotel, Dujamaisvu asked: "You said you're leaving tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, I'm leaving the hotel at 6am back for Puttkamerstown."

"I'll be here at 5:30am to say goodbye," said the girl. "If it wasn't for the fact that I am writing my end of semester exams today and tomorrow at the University of Assieyam, I would be delighted to come to spend the night with you again."

"Please don't come," Lilly Loveless implored.

"How can one not come when you're around, baby?" asked Dujamaisvu, flirtatiously.

"Bobinga Iroko will be here too. He's travelling with me and we are going in his car," Lilly Loveless spelt out.

"Don't talk to me about Bobinga Iroko," said Dujamaisvu, then turned and walked off.

Lilly Loveless watched her disappear into the distance. Then she turned and slowly retraced her steps to the hotel room, not knowing what to think about last night and the events and exchanges that filled it. As dawn broke, billboards sprung to life bearing prominent slogans: 'Girl Child Education. A Citizen Duty, A Vital Choice'; 'Women: Bed Rock of the Society'; 'WO-men: Well-Organised Men'; 'Access to Productive Resources for the Prosperity of Mimboland'; 'Condomise to say No to HIV/AIDS'. Lilly Loveless smiled when she read the last slogan. She always carried with her the box of condoms she was offered the day she landed at the Sawang International Airport. She still vividly remembered the words of the fair-skinned lady who had given her the box: "life's too sweet and too short to

waste". Lilly Loveless regretted not being able to call the kind lady who had insisted she shouldn't hesitate to call if she needed something. If she hadn't misplaced the woman's business card, she would have called just to let her know that she had had a fruitful stay in Mimboland and was now rounding up her fieldwork to return to Muzunguland.

Just outside the hotel, Lilly Loveless noticed a postal of the ruling party carrying the effigy of President Longstay. The words on the postal had been freshly corrupted with a bold marker from 'Winners of the latest Democratic Elections' to 'Sinners of the Latest Democratic Erections'. She wondered just who could have pulled such a fast one on a government notoriously reputed for the vigilance of its secret service. Dujamaisvu? No, she didn't strike me as political, Lilly Loveless dismissed the thought. Bobinga Iroko? Perhaps.

* * *

When she visited a cybercafé in Sawang on their way back to Puttkamerstown, Lilly Loveless found mail for her from Dujamaisvu. She couldn't have thought that the girl would decipher an email address scribbled for her on a matchbox with no intention of legibility whatsoever. Curious to know what Dujamaisvu could possibly have written, Lilly Loveless read the mail: "Dear Lilly, I miss you my love. Come back to me sweetheart, I'm sitting here at the bar of your hotel waiting. You know what I want, what I'm anticipating. Let me touch you and tease you, squeeze you and please you. You make me smile, you make me shine, for no one moves me like you. There are lots of things that you don't know. You make my body burn. I smile and bite my lip at the things you say. My eyes roll back and my toes curl. Just know I'm yours. Let me be the lovely and colourful butterfly tatoed to your right buttock. Bizou..."

Lilly Loveless whispered the word 'Bizou' slowly out loud. She liked the way it vibrated on the roof of her mouth and oozed from her lips, filling her with delight. But she refused to be tempted. She deleted the mail and spammed the email address. Who was it, who said that sleeping with someone you wouldn't necessarily meet socially is a little bit of erotic escapism? She couldn't remember, but she had learnt her lesson from the disastrous phone call of the bumster of Sunsandland. Full of feelings though she had been, she had clearly asked him to respect her boundaries. "There's no reason why you shouldn't write to me at home, but please don't try to phone me there. If you should need to contact me – for any reasons other than the obvious – you can leave a message for me at the Department of Geography, Muzunguland African Studies Institute, Bruhlville. I call in most days for my messages." Yet the bumster had ignored all this and done what he did. Never again would she allow such experiences to haunt her.

When Lilly Loveless returned from Nyamandem, she found a note from Britney saying she had dashed off to Zintgraffstown to attend to her mom and daughter reported sick with typhoid. In the same note, Britney insisted she would be back in time to see her off to the airport in Sawang. Lilly Loveless didn't find Desire either who had again taken advantage of the prolonged strike to go to her home village to sort out some matters. She thus decided to use the few days she still had in Puttkamerstown to organize a few focus group discussions with some flying-shirts, for which she received much support from Burning Spear, Adapepe's boyfriend, but from which she didn't learn that much.

The flying-shirts were not that keen to talk about their sexuality and explain why they did what they did with women, jumping from one to the other, with little regard for how women really felt or what they really wanted from relationships with men. When they weren't busy trying to chat her up or to extract information on how to get visas into Muzunguland, the flying-shirts were unnerving and gave clichéd answers to her questions.

"A man is a man," said one repeatedly, flexing his muscles and pulling up his shirt sleeve, in response to almost every question asked. It was he whom Lilly Loveless was convinced had stripped her with his eyes far more times than she could remember. If only he knew that back home in Muzunguland she stripped as effortlessly as she dressed herself, the thought crossed her mind, he would have given her his last Mim dollar to feed his eyes. Although Lilly Loveless insisted names were not important, as she was more interested in opinions than in identities, he kept shouting "I am Randy", as if he ran the risk of forgetting his name.

"That's the way God created the world, for men to lead and women to follow with obedience and service, said another in a deep intimidating voice. "Bend skin give chop for masa," he quoted a popular song to make his point. "And there's nothing a man will eat that stops hunger forever," he added.

A third said, "It all boils down to nature. Men by nature are not creatures of compromise, so when a woman starts asking for concessions, it's time to move camp."

A fourth agreed about nature. "Society is all about protecting the weak, and as far as I'm concerned, no one is weaker than a woman. One could argue that the notion of one-man-one-woman is foreign to man, a way of controlling and regulating his nature. At the core, we are still hunters and gatherers, out for the kill. We may tame ourselves for all we want as society dictates, but when we close the door we really become who we are. In that instance you may try to convince yourself but you'll never force your biological nature to accept that you're carved for that one woman stretched next to you. It is then up to you to decide whether or not to disregard the one-on-one rules. Funny, for all the rational ways of life that have been designed for us to live as a society, at the end of the day it's the raw call of nature that we answer."

For a fifth flying-shirt, "Since tradition confines and modernity liberates, men who listen to the call of both worlds must have a foot in both.

On the one hand, we maintain ties to tradition by marrying, but we keep an open eye for others we can invite into our lives. I think open ended relationships give both sexes room to negotiate tradition and modernity."

A sixth introduced the notion of "commodification, where the value of women is measured in numbers", and "men see relationships as investments". "Considering how volatile the stock exchange can be, men seek to diversify their portfolio to protect their investments. It is too dangerous to keep all your eggs in a single market basket," he concluded.

A seventh fervently agreed. "When a thousand girls throw themselves at one guy, it's hard for him to ignore that he's hot currency. In that position, he knows he has a wide field to play on. Whichever girl does not want to be in his team can sign out and will be easily replaced", he explained.

An eighth flying-shirt who hardly spoke made this comment: "Only a few guys really know what to do with women, and those few keep on getting the bulk of women. So though on a head count there might be many men around, in reality – and something women are good at sensing – those who really know what makes women feel on top are few and far between. Women are willing to cut some slack for such a man in return for what he gives them."

Although not part of the discussion, Burning Spear added his voice as an observer. "Women with low self-esteem constantly need to be validated by someone else, and for this reason will fall for words, the stock in trade of men who sample women like butterflies do flowers."

To Lilly Loveless, the discussion, which lasted several hours and cost her a fortune in beer and roasted meat, also confirmed what Britney had found out through her stories collected mainly from women: Love of variety for variety's sake; the need to display wealth and power and impress fellow men by winning women as trophies; lack of other imaginative ways of celebrating achievement, power and material comfort; beliefs in the supernatural medicinal qualities and potency of especially younger women in taming the occult; and reliance on violence, debasement and humiliation of others for self-assurance.

It was in relation to the latter point that the flying-shirts were most bitter. They deplored the treatment inflicted on them by their male superiors – the Mbomas. All of them in the focus group hated the way Mbomas harvested the best crop of girls around. They felt outdone by the relative advantage of financial and material comfort. Many felt the humiliation too much to bear and several related stories of bitter confrontation and violent disagreements with girlfriends because of Mbomas. Typically, Lilly Loveless noticed, the overwhelming tendency was for the flying-shirts to blame the girls. Few of them accepted her argument that the girls they blamed were in fact victims of a violent game played in the name of love, that ultimately had little to do with love.

After squeezing them for all she could get, Lilly Loveless paid for the drinks and roasted meat they had consumed, thanked them and moved on.

* * *

Another thing Lilly Loveless did in her last days in Mimboland was read Dr Wiseman Lovemore's paper and *A Nose for Money*, both of which she

had postponed reading for fear of being prematurely influenced.

She felt bad that the trip to Nyamandem had not yielded the results which she and Bobinga Iroko had hoped for. They had been forced to return without seeing Dr Wiseman Lovemore. Access to him was impossible even for the world's leading human rights advocates whom Bobinga Iroko and *The Talking Drum* had mobilized through the Internet and their diaspora connections. It was particularly painful to read Dr Wiseman Lovemore's paper, knowing she would have to keep her feedback to herself instead of sharing it with him as he had requested. Why hadn't she read it before? But then how could she have known how things would turn out?

She found the paper intriguing and appreciated how Dr Wiseman Lovemore had done an in-depth analysis. She felt vindicated for having decided to postpone reading it, for it most certainly would have coloured her understanding of the issues in those early days. At the end of her second reading, Lilly Loveless decided to type up the following excerpt, to make it easy for her to draw from it in the course of her own writing:

Desperately Seeking Something

'[...] Here in Mimboland, it's as common as elsewhere on the continent to find a strong and steady relationship between a married, mostly elderly, man and a young unmarried girl, often a high school or university student. Relationships between married women and high school or university male students are also possible, though less frequent. Most of the men involved with female students are apparently very happily married, some with children the age of those they long to have. Some of these girls also have young lovers as well, who are of their age group, and with some of whom they share common dreams of marriage and making a family. Yet most of the married men and young girls often successfully put up strong and passionate relationships that sometimes threaten marriages. Sometimes these relationships are the happiest in the world. Usually, the Mboma – also known, *inter alia*, as Swallowers, Papa Friend, Uncle Boyfriend, Big Fish, Sugar Daddy, Tutuleur, Bon-payeur, Numero Gagneant, Daddy, Anaconda, Mec, Jack pot, This Pikin Their Papa, Big Guns, Papa, Cashious, Customers, Tycoon, Grandpa, Pope, Big Belly, and Patron – and the girl spend lots of time together, the man taking care of the girl's needs and the girl making sure she keeps the man happy and feeling young. Sometimes, everyone knows of the relationship for months or years except the man's wife, but when she does tension fills the air and so do jealousy, frustration and threats.

'Reasons for these relationships vary from girl to girl and man to man. They include psychological, economic and social reasons. Lack of parental love and care is one of the main reasons why some students date married men. Girls who grew up in broken homes, who were born out of wedlock or who had no social fathers are more likely to date married men because they need a father figure to give them the love, care and protection they lacked as children. Girls of high class parents who grew up with a certain respect for class and status and had rich uncles, aunts and cousins, date married men because they feel a need to respect and maintain the standards of life they grew up with. Also, unlike single men, married men are more caring in their relationships with female students. Unlike young boys and bachelors who take their girlfriends' emotions for granted and who are

more promiscuous, less caring and not very providing, married men are not that much of heartbreakers. They take care of their girlfriends emotionally and materially, and tend to be more faithful to them than their bachelor counterparts.

Eating Up: Why Girls Date Mbomas

'On the material and economic front, these girls may also date married men because of greed. They have an insatiable desire for wealth and pleasure. They go for men that are financially stable and that can serve as sponsors to them. Some girls date these men because they need a constant source of money for their rents, fees, clothing and feeding. Also, these men are usually well placed in society and can influence job opportunities. Girls at the University of Mimbo, who date ministers, parliamentarians, directors, general managers, customs officers, state treasurers, business men and so on, often have the hidden or expressed agenda of being able to use them to access jobs and opportunities. They could thus be said to exploit the men and to use them as facilitators to achieving their goals. Because of the acute economic crisis, ordinary parents cannot adequately provide for the needs of their children. It is common to see girls at university who do not have beds and mattresses and those who lack cookers or even books. These girls, in order to solve their economic problems therefore, turn to dating married men who are made to serve as meal tickets, among other things. The married men are a means to an end. Even for the most study-conscious girls, there is an attraction in going out with married men. You have time to yourself when dating married men. Since they do not always have to stay out late, the time you spend with them is limited and you can use the extra time you have lucratively, either for studies, relaxation or anything of your choice.

'There are reasons of ostentation as well, of which university girls are the most affected. Some of them love to display wealth and prestige. And thus they may choose to date married men if doing so could lead them to achieve all or any of the following: open bank accounts for themselves; dress expensively and be admired; furnish their rooms or even live in apartments, something not easily affordable otherwise as students; go on pleasure trips in "big flashy cars"; be seen and associated with men of class, and hence become girls of class; simply for competition with friends and be able to earn respect among mates as those who are richer, have the most men, the most clothes, the most shoes and the most jewellery, and have slept in the most in the most prestigious hotels; and occupy the front seat of cars that tell their stories in tens of millions and in flashy personalized number plates, is a prestige which most girls who date married man seek.

'In all this, married men are solutions to problems of all types. Some girls think married men are less exposed to sexually transmitted diseases since they are married and will always do everything to protect their wives and families from illnesses. Therefore, they date married men to limit and control the spread of diseases. Also, as girls would say, it is better to be second to the wife of a married man and know that you are second, than think you are first only to discover that you have been deceived by a single man with a bonbon coated tongue. The tendency is for girls to see married men as less of heart-breakers and better at taking care of their emotional needs than young men or bachelors.

'Of course, it is not all rosy dating married men. There are inconveniences, risks and displeasures as well. But the girls often choose to live with them. The most pressing and general regret to some tends to be the fact that they can't always get to see the married man as much as they would like or when they want. "You cannot call them at home in case of an emergency, and so you always have to wait on them to make the next move," is a regular complaint. In a way, married men call the tune, which could be very frustrating for any girl who chooses to invest emotionally in them. It makes them appear like call girls, especially when the men have other girls as well. While some can't handle this, others don't mind, as long as the men give them what they need, usually money. Another pressing worry is the constant fear of a nasty encounter or confrontation with the lawfully wedded wife. At the end, the girls usually are the losers, since eligible bachelors tend to fear girls who have dated married men and to avoid having anything to do with them. Hence, these girls have less chances of marriage.

Eating Down: Why Mbomas Date Girls

'As for married men dating young secondary, high school and university girls, their reasons are just as many and varied. Some do it for economic reasons as well. Following the difficult economic situation of Mimboland, some men are initially forced to get married to girls of lower status, mostly from their home villages, and usually given to them by their parents. But as their economic situation improves, they turn to dating girls of higher status as a way of satisfy their innermost desires. Such men tend to want to compensate for what they could not afford during years of hardship, now that they have made it. They like girls who are very pretty and sophisticated in bed – doing the sort of things that stars do in movies, and whom they can take to parties and show off, and of whom they can boast as good sexual partners who master the techniques of modern love making. They would hesitate to spend their money on a girl who does not make them feel different in and out of bed through exotic unconventional practices. There has to be a clear sense of value-added in reality and in make-believe.

'It is also believed that married men with good jobs where they can receive lots of bribe or embezzle with impunity have much more money to spend, and therefore are inclined to seek girls whom they can exploit. Because they have money and these girls are at times so desperate, they indulge in excesses that can only be described as exploitation. They also seek these girls in pursuit of love, which their nagging wives cannot offer them at home. Some use girls as escape or distraction from the heat of marriage, or from occupational hurdles.

'For some, it is to meet up with cult demands for future enrichment or achievements by sucking the life essence from these girls who become victims. Some simply want change, since familiarity breeds contempt and men have been known to complain against eating the same food day in day out. Men are known to explain running after younger girls as seeking to keep away from less appealing menopausal wives.

'Other reasons include: culture and tradition, according to which the more women a man has, the more respect; intentions for polygamy, hence the quest for second, third, fourth, or nth wife; need for children, by men whose wives are barren and who feel the pressure to prove themselves by having

children with young and fertile girls; excitement, since some men find the experience of hiding in student rooms very exciting and worthwhile; to regain vitality and good health; to establish their future better; need of companion for business and pleasure trips; to boost their ego with feelings of having helped out; for status, since for some of them these girls are more educated than their wives and with the changes in the status of women today, some men prefer literate girls to their illiterate wives; to celebrate their material success, especially for those with money enough to build mansions, buy flashy cars and undertake trips and missions abroad either for business or on behalf of the government; to spread, consciously, HIV/AIDS, venereal and other diseases of love which they know they have; because girls are readily available at affordable rates.

Money as a Visibilizer

'There are certain ethnic groups whose women are notorious for being seen with other men at night in bars, meetings and 'cry-dies' – funerals. "No, they're not after sexual pleasure, because many of them have been circumcised. If you've not known the pleasure of sexual activity, you don't know how to look for it. They know however that they get material benefits, which they in turn reinvest in their beauty – a cultural expectation. Some women in polygamous relationships go out to get funds to support their efforts at dressing, beauty, and appetites, because the man who used to give her enough for that is now dividing his earnings among several women. As one woman whose husband had totally failed her sexually after five years of married put it, "Even a circumcised woman could experience sexual pleasure, if she's with a sensitive man, who knows how to read the inner feelings of a woman burning with desire. Everything doesn't boil down to the clitoris. The find gold, a man must dig deep beyond the surface". But when the man's sensitivity is confined to his need for sex, the women satisfy men on this front in return for material benefit – if one cannot harvest pleasure, one might as well harvest treasure. This would explain why at public manifestations involving singing and dancing by cultural groups, some men will throw money at the group – knowing that women in the audience will notice them and pick them out to pursue later. This is what I term money as a visibiliser.

'If girls sometimes feel exploited by married men, these men also feel exploited by the girls they date – a case of mutual zombification. It is true that without their money, most of these married men would not be attractive to the girls they date. Even with money in certain cases, it takes a lot of courage or chronic poverty for a girl to go out with some of these obviously comprehensively unattractive men. In most cases, the girls cannot accept to be second wives, which sometimes is indicative of lack of real feelings or commitment for the men they are dealing with.'

Lilly Loveless paused and noted the following on the margin: 'Are the men interested in second or third wives? It is not an easy arrangement as many academic and non academic writings show that multiple partnerships come at a price for men and women. In fact my fieldwork shows the same. The point is why should the girls accept it? Better cut one's losses and get the money and leave.'

Then she continued reading: 'Also, when the men lose their jobs, they are likely to lose their girls too because, joblessness implies subsequent

poverty, and a poor married man, is a whole waste of time in this game. With declarations by men such as the following, feelings of exploitation are bound to be mutual: "We will always go back home no matter what we do outside or feel for you girls because a wife is a wife and a girlfriend a girlfriend. Home is home". Considerate to married women though this may be, married women are embittered by the fact that these girls allow themselves to go out with their men. They want the girls to leave their husbands alone, and some are determined to go as far as witchcraft, magic and violence to make this clear. Others have accepted this as a way of life, daring from time to time to seek to beat their men at their game. Others are less reluctant to yield, and would warm up to calls for women's emancipation, and for the enlightenment of the young and upcoming generation to the virtues of moral rectitude....'

Appended to the paper was a clipping from *Mbangala Tutu*, Mimboland's most popular society magazine published in Sakersbeach, a copy of which Lilly Loveless once bought under persuasion from Britney. The title of the clipping was: '*Who No Know Say Latrine-for Corner House di Smell Pass Mark?*' This was followed by a quote:

"If you wanna find silver, go looking in the valley,
If you wanna find gold, go digging in the stone,
If you wanna find heaven, go reading the Bible,
If you wanna find love, go looking at home."

Then a comment from the author, a certain Ndombolo Na Hélélé: "I think Don Williams was right except for the fourth line." After going on and on about how much "latrine for corner house di smell pass mark", how it is inconceivable to "torture your husband with a meal of potatoes" day in day out, "confine a man of achievements to a tiny little office", or "expect someone to dance all night if he only knows one tune," he declares: "Everywhere on earth, especially here in Mimboland, it is considered normal for a married man to keep a concubine and/or to visit prostitutes. That is why when we hear a man has an affair, we don't ask: 'how dares he?' Rather, we ask: 'Why has it taken him this long? Is he normal?'..."

He proceeds to say what exactly men adore about the women they aspire after as they climb with achievement up the phallocratic order. Several phrases caught Lilly Loveless's attention, amongst which "the smaller the tighter, the tighter the better". Hadn't she read something like this before? She took out the copy of the paper, which she had brought along for Dr Wiseman Lovemore but which she had forgotten completely to give him. No, not exactly forgotten; the strike and Dr Wiseman Lovemore's arrest and indefinite detention without trial came too soon for her to give him the paper. With the aid of her forefinger, she rapidly skimmed through. She didn't find those exact words, but she did underline the following paragraph, with intentions of citing it in her writing up:

'In matters of sex, first-rate consumption means going for the juiciest and rarest, which for older men and women entails shopping down the generational ladder (right into paedophilia) for power, status and privilege. For the younger generations, it means shopping up (among sugar daddies, sweat mamas, businessmen and women, whites,

tourists and others) for consumer opportunities and consumer citizenship. The current context of acute poverty interlinked with dramatic and luring images of desire and abundance, has accelerated the commoditization of sex in Africa, putting morality and God on hold as money and survival take centre stage.'

Lilly Loveless went back to the clipping. The author asked: "Why is 'love' increasingly available only out of the matrimonial home?" Claiming that was the Million Mim Dollar question, the author says *Mbangala Tutu* has discovered new and startling motives for an old problem. It has conducted a sample survey, the results of which would be featured regularly and for the rest of the year, starting with the current issue.

Amongst his first six respondents is a businessman who says: 'the problem is one of lack of communication between husband and wife, which leads to men rushing out of the house every time there is a quarrel. Some men feel that the only answer to a nagging wife is to look for a concubine, but that is wrong. It only ends up destroying the home. It is better to have dialogue with your wife and point out where you think there is a problem. Solving a problem by running away is only making the problem double or worse.'

A male teacher blames: 'the nature of man. Man seeks variety, which is the spice of life. Sleeping with the same woman is regarded as monotonous. In our African society it is not common to have divorce on grounds of sexual dissatisfaction, so men prefer to keep their wives while looking for love outside. It also has to do with natural changes in the constitution of the man and woman. Women age faster than men. While a man at forty or fifty is still entering the prime of youth, many women are on the declining side of age once they turn thirty. So added to other issues like childbirth which ages a woman rapidly and changes her body constitution, men decide to look for younger, more agile girls with firmer bodies to satisfy them.'

Someone identified simply as 'a married woman' situates the problem in the fact that: 'Men are like children. They want all the toys they can find. They do all that to prove to themselves that they are still young and active whereas they are not. It is a sign of immaturity and irresponsibility too, because we tell them that if it is two wives they want why not marry the one outside and bring home? But you think they can? They just want to play, like little adolescents jumping from one bed to the other.'

A male medical doctor feels that women are to blame for: 'thinking that men are natural polygamists, so whether you go out or not, you are guilty. It is a situation of do and be damned, don't and be damned. I have been married for eight years, but I can tell you that my wife still does not understand me. If I come home late in the evening and decide to take a shower she starts suspecting me and her behaviour changes immediately, whereas I could as well do whatever I want and take a bath before coming home. Some women actually encourage their men to go out.'

A female sociology student at the University of Mimbo says: 'the causes are manifold, societal, personal, emotional, etc. First of all, society finds it normal for men to have mistresses. For one thing, a man does not have to fear getting pregnant. The fact that men have money to spend on their mistresses also accounts for this situation. Some men who are henpecked at home love to go out because with their concubines they can play the

domineering role which is important to the male psyche.'

A male civil servant believes that: 'some men prefer prostitutes because prostitutes are open to them. Some women do not want their husbands to know that they enjoy making love, so they prefer to pretend. They think sex is very wrong and a good housewife should not ask for it. But you need to see them with their boyfriends and you will not believe your eyes.'

As Lilly Loveless read, she remembered yet another section of the paper, which she underlined and by the side of which she wrote in pencil, "relevant to section on sexual metaphors". In the passage, a married man, tired of being served 'potatoes' several times a night, ventures out to look for an alternative meal, only to be rewarded with pleasure diminished by pain. Tchop Tchop, the comedian who composed the sketch to assist with the fight against HIV/AIDS, uses the imagery of a filling station attendant working at the 'World Petrol Station,' servicing vehicles of all shapes, sizes and ages, whose confidence in an innocent looking 'Mini Minor' endangers his petrol pump and lands him in trouble. On second thought, Lilly Loveless decided to type the excerpt of the ordeal on her laptop:

Of all these cars, I chose the smallest, the most attractive, a Mini Minor. And she had just arrived in the filling station. The Mini Minor, even though a little car, its back is uplifted, and it is curved, with a round bottom and a protruding front. When you look at the head of the car, it has small eyes like this, but if you stand back a little, it is swollen, rounded, a cute little car, a car like it just came out of the manufacturers. I could not imagine that people could have cars like that. You could not even imagine a defect in the gas tank of such a car. I said no, it is in this car that I will serve my gas today. Instead of stopping like the other cars, it crosses. Here I am following it. I make a sign. I say, waro, waro, waro. The car stops. I say, do you need gas? Hé hé. A deal is reached.

Now, I have to fill the tank. We backed up behind Ste Bernadette. I found a good fuel tank. We stopped at a warehouse. I took my petrol pump out. I thought the size of it would this small gas tank, but the Mini Minor widely opened its small reservoir, as if it had been visited by another gas station attendant. I sunk my petrol pump deep without difficulty. It went all the way to the bottom of the gas tank. That is how the gas was freed and reached its objective. I get my petrol pump out and put it away and go home. 24 hours only after that, I try my petrol pump. It was now leaking red gas oil. I ask myself, how? I run away from big trucks for fear of defect, now my petrol pump breaks down in a Mini Minor? What is this? After some 24 hours, the pump leaked only concentrated milk...

In a footnote at the end of the excerpt, Lilly Loveless added, "I find it hard to reconcile this perceptive and insightful analysis by Dr Wiseman Lovemore with the image of him as an insensitive, unsupportive, male chauvinist pig that comes across from my conversation with Mrs Lovemore. Why should his scholarship and personal life be like night and day? How could he live with the fact that what he studies does not impact on his

personal life?"

Through with her footnote to Dr Wiseman Lovemore's paper, she turned her attention to *A Nose for Money*. She devoured it with many a smile curling her lips as the numerous déjà-vus emerged from the narrative. Apart from the graphic depiction of Nyamandem where she had just been, Lilly Loveless often thought: 'Hey, I believe I know that guy, I've seen him somewhere cruising to and fro between Sawang, Puttkamerstown and Sakersbeach.' And the fateful money doublers, the ministerial pomp, the blinding seduction of wealth and women, and the proverbial disillusionment when confronted with the secrets of wisdom and truth embedded deep inside traditional systems of knowledge. She thought the book was a tough piece at the end yet without meandering off into total frustration and ridicule like Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* who cannot get any further than spending most of his time 'swimming gaily on the surface of life'!

Much like some of the stories Britney had gathered for Lilly Loveless, a sad, but yet true aspect of the novel, as pointed out in a review in the *The Talking Drum* was the novel's portrayal of women. As the reviewer argued, while a good number of women in Mimboland strive to make a living for themselves and amass whatever they can in terms of wealth, the mindset of the ordinary Mimboland woman is that she cannot do this without the support of some man. For many this has meant living and/or staying on in a marriage that is a sham, like Rose. Rose was not particularly happy that Prospère was never around, but being the traditional Mimboland woman, pretence and faked happiness was the game here.

Going by the stories Britney collected, for many women in Mimboland, leaving Prospère, like for Rose, would never have been an option. They would rather stay on and seek alternative means of getting their physical and sexual needs satisfied because for them marriage is 'wealth' and there is overwhelming social pressure to be married and to stick in there, in sickness or in health, till death does us part.

Moreover, who knows? Things may suddenly work out, Prospère would become rich and automatically they are made. The likes of Charlotte, Marie-Claire and Chantal are numerous and are found in increasing numbers as evidenced in the seekers after highly placed Mbomas found in some of the stories Britney had collected. These were among the women Lilly Loveless had repeatedly heard never truly care for anyone but themselves – very much like Adapepe, whom she had enjoyed talking with. Like the reviewer pointed out, they idolize their bodies and would do anything to ensure that they stay beautiful, charming and sophisticated, not for themselves in the main, but as bait for men of substance. Naturally, rich and wealthy men – Mbomas – like treasurers, customs officers, ministers, director generals and other highly placed state officials, are their preys and the interest here is mainly in their 'fat wallets'. Again, because marriage is ultimately seen as wealth for the Mimboland woman, she would keep a boyfriend on the side – informal sector, if you like, with whom she hopes she will eventually settle. Many such women have had to suffer heart breaks as these 'service-boys' have played a smart one on them as well.

Here Lilly Loveless remembered an article in one of the newspapers during her journey out to Mimboland, about a group of young men on the prowl who borrow or rent expensive cars, fancy clothing, watches, imported

shoes and hats, who spend huge sums of money and even borrow heavily to make themselves look sophisticated and rich enough to attract high society women whom they pretend to marry. They pretend to be businessmen or have well-paying jobs and university degrees, are almost always clean shaved, and go under the popular name of feymen. Once they've lured these women into marriage and are in a position of unlimited access to their wealth or the wealth of their parents, they don't care whether or not their wives find out the truth about them. And if the wives uncover the truth and want a divorce, they refuse to grant them a divorce until the women or their families agree to part with a huge chunk of their fortune. They may curse and swear, but the husband is immune to moral blackmail, as he feels they are to blame for limiting marriage only to those who can afford it materially. No sooner does he get what he wants than the husband starts all over again, hunting for new prey. These feymen of marriage are very good at concealing their poverty until it is too late for the family to do anything. As the paper noted, the victims are not always women of means. Often, poor women are deceived by their own dreams of a rich groom, only to be turned out on the street to beg for their husbands and eventually for their children.

Another reality demonstrated in the book and highlighted in many of the cases collected by Britney, is what happens when true love comes along in the midst of deceit, mistrust and disloyalty. True-love is questioned and sacrificed, just as Monique – Prospère's third wife, but ultimately because it is true, reveals the truth. A truth that leads to the end of deceit and pretence: the death of Prospère.

Lilly Loveless also enjoyed the sinister rumours surrounding Prospère and his wealth, and thought that she will have to draw a lot from them to strengthen the data on the power of the occult in perceptions of wealth and love in Mimboland. Already, she could see lots of similarities between the stories Mariette had shared with her, and some of the larger than logic happenings in the novel.

In all, Lilly Loveless could understand why Britney had strongly recommended *A Nose for Money*, but at the same time, she was happy with her decision to postpone reading until now.

It is late into the night. Bobinga Iroko is unable to sleep. He is working on the editorial for the next issue of *The Talking Drum*. He has deliberately refused to carry the story on homosexuality. His priority remains the strike at the University of Mimbo, which, curiously, hasn't attracted much coverage from the rest of the national press concentrated in Nyamandem and Sawang. He and *The Talking Drum*, the formidable odds against them notwithstanding, are determined to crusade along like a lone ranger, until victory day. They believe the sun must not be allowed to set on a good idea.

He is also struggling with an obituary following the sudden death, under very mysterious circumstances, of one of the rare genuine intellectuals at the University of Mimbo. Despised by the authorities as an 'unbelievably vain, hopelessly incompetent and disestablishmentarian crank,' and Known popularly as 'Intellectual Warrior', Dr BP ('Burning Pen') was found dead last night at his home, his skull shattered, his brain and genitals missing. In his transition from Burning Pen to Buried Pen, he looked more like the victim of a ritual murder than of a robbery. Dr BP was not afraid to make career limiting statements, and would rather die than be cowed. He had absolute disdain for those who were neither here nor there in their convictions, those who seemed to say things only to please the way a chameleon would its vicinity. To him, such people were shallow, myopic, spineless irrelevances. A screaming and fearless critic who once described the University of Mimbo as the 'burial ground for enthusiasm', Dr BP was writing a commentary titled 'J'accuse', when he was smashed to death in midsentence.

Dr BP died doing what he has always done: fighting to make a difference and making a difference by fighting. To Bobinga Iroko and *The Talking Drum*, Dr BP died keeping hope alive in a hopeless situation, adding the weight of his pen to efforts to bring back a bit of dignity to the lives of ordinary Mimbolanders stripped bare by shallow pretence, sterile rhetoric and its radical vocabulary of hate. He died fighting the battles he would want those he leaves behind to keep fighting. In a context where many an intellectual has been silenced by the lure and allure of easy virtue and the sterile politics of reckless impunity, BP was the rare exception who stayed wedded to the ideals of the genuine intellectual, academic freedom and social responsibility.

Bobinga Iroko will always cherish BP's essays and contributions in the pages of *The Talking Drum*, which were as clear about what he believed to be wrong with the land of his birth, as they were about what he thought it would take to make right those wrongs. It is therefore unfortunate and indeed ironic that BP should pass on in a suspicious death most cruel, and not those excesses his essays and commentaries were meant to bury. And it is equally unfortunate that he should leave the scene just when he was ready to share with the world in person the richness of his experience of a country and a university community where a reluctant government and those whose intellects it has numbed would spare nothing to derail the train of hope and human dignity.

BP epitomized those who refuse to stand by and watch the train of hope and human dignity derailed. He stood for those who would rather fight

than run away (wasn't it Bob Marley who said it all – he who fights and runs away lives to fight another day?). BP the flesh and blood may have died, BP the Idea has never been more alive. This can be seen in the determination and resilience by students of the University of Mimbo to keep aglow their ambitions of academic freedom and the quest for betterment in equality, dignity and opportunity for all and sundry.

This, as BP and others who have sacrificed their lives have always claimed, requires a particular calibre of leadership. As BP has stressed ad infinitum, any leader, no matter how good, needs others to compensate for their weaknesses. A good leader is one who encourages others to lead without overly dramatizing the fact of being in charge. He or she is one who surrounds themselves with people of contradictory opinions in order to be forced to think, compare and contrast before reaching a decision.

The way forward for the University of Mimbo and for Mimboland, BP stressed in what none could have imagined was his last commentary in the pages of *The Talking Drum*, is by recognizing that leadership is not about the leader. It is about the enabling environment the leader creates for experts in various walks of life and for all and sundry under him or her to offer leadership. A good leader is one who is able to purge him or herself of the delusion that bosses are necessarily better than the people under them. Modesty is the master key to success in leadership, for a good leader immediately recognises that he or she needs support to lead, and that a leader never leads alone. 'Leadership is more of a privilege than a right, just as a leader is more of a servant than a master', BP emphasized, adding that only at the University of Mimbo and in Mimboland did the contrary obtain. 'With leaders who have neither modesty nor generosity of spirit, who thrive on the argument of force and not the force of argument, institutions dry out and wither, not for lack of talent but for lack of purpose.' Woe betides the leader who takes decisions without consultation, and who excludes from leadership people who have a lot of talent because he or she is too afraid to be contradicted or to discover that no single individual however gifted has a monopoly of good ideas.

'It is difficult to advise a leader who is always right,' argued BP, 'hence the need to create circumstances where other leaders can be fostered. This starts with inclusion, fairness and opportunity for all and sundry.' BP ended his commentary with the words: 'We often get the leaders we deserve by giving myopic individuals the power to silence the creativity and difference that should normally edify and strengthen an institution, a community or a country. The University of Mimbo and the people of Mimboland deserve a better fate than the disgrace lumped on them by the predicament of a mediocrity called leadership.'

The state is trying to lure students back to class with cosmetic concessions. Promises have been made to the effect that the government will pay the hospital bills for students injured during the strike, grant absolute and unconditional immunity to all students for acts committed during the strike, and completely evacuate the campus of the riot police, gendarmes and soldiers in exchange for a promise by students to comport themselves henceforth with a high degree of responsibility void of violence and vandalism. There is much going and coming between the leadership of the students and the team of negotiators appointed by the government. But much

of it, as far as Bobinga Iroko is concerned, is like dreaming with your eyes wide open. He is a Doubting Thomas when it comes to the state of this land of Mimbo making concessions. He expects no miracles by a Longstay and a regime whose naked determination to hang onto power without legitimacy has entrenched comprehensive mass poverty through acts of inflationary corruption, wanton embezzlement, impunity and callous disregard for democracy and the humanity of folks forgotten.

It has been rumoured that the VC and Registrar just might be replaced for overly valorising mysticism and the dark side of the human spirit, but few amongst students and staff believe such rumours. Like Bobinga Iroko and his *Talking Drum*, they've become hardened Doubting Thomas's as far as President Longstay and his regime are concerned. They promise mountains in strings of political platitudes and deliver barren valleys, and they use words as if words were the world's most devalued currency. Noise, noise and ever more noise signifying absolutely nothing, has become their stock in trade. The VC and the Reg are the first to dismiss such rumours, and they are right, for, what do you expect of those appointed to service someone with a name like Longstay? They have been called all sorts of names, blamed for all the bad and the ugly, and virtually fed to dogs by public opinion, but who says public opinion matters? Who cares for such nonsense as letting the people speak? Worse still, listening to them? And acting upon what they say?

With the active support of their diviners and magicians, political godfathers and the various fraternities to which they doubly belong, the VC and Reg are sure to have the last laugh. Again, they've been out and about flexing their muscles both mysteriously and in reality, even as rumours intensify about their impending demise. The other day, in broad daylight, watched by the striking students, the general public and the republican rottweilers alike, the VC and Reg visibly taught their enemies a seminal lesson in the occult. Two vultures from nowhere landed on a mango tree at Mammy Nyangaa's makeshift restaurant, and started fighting. It was a very bloody fight that lasted an hour, at the end of which one of the vultures fell down and the other fell on it and pecked away at its throat, splashing blood until the beaten vulture passed out. Flapping its wings triumphantly, the victorious vulture flew off.

Those in the crowd endowed with ability to see beyond appearances and the immediate, said it was a sign that the strike will come to nothing, just as will the enemies of the VC and the Reg. They associated the fallen vulture with the leaders of the strike and enemies of the VC and Reg, whom they identified with the victorious vulture. To them, it was out of the question for the VC and Reg to condescend to negotiate with students who preferred destruction and infliction of pain and death to dialogue. "No parent would take kindly to a child who asks for something and proceeds to breaking down the house while the request is still being examined," they reasoned. For their part, the students screamed in protest. "You can kill our leaders, but you can't kill our spirits," they shouted in unison. "Leaders may come and go, but our dreams of academic freedom are paramount..."

Later that evening, the president of the Student Union, Samson Freeboy Bigmop, and yet another member of staff closely linked with the strike – Chief Dr Mantrouble Anyway, were found dead in mysterious circumstances, their bodies dismembered, their genitalia and brains

harvested. The students bore their grief in dignity, fortitude and active anger. They gathered at the University Junction to pay their last respects and renew their resolve. Adapepe came forward and tearfully addressed the crowd of students: "He was like an umbrella that we hid beneath," she said of the Student Union president. "Now that he is gone, we are forced to step forward and take responsibility. His departure is a massive blow to the student family, but our best tribute to him must remain our collective resolve and bouncebackability. We must show maturity and assume the vacuum created by his sad and tragic departure. May his death enable the sunlight of unity to finally break through the cloud of difference that has paralysed the student community and made us easy prey for vultures in power. May we, henceforth, like one big hand, hold those who stand in the way of change by the balls and say: 'Show us you've really got them!'"

Sources close to the VC and Reg reported how the two celebrated with a bottle of expensive champagne. Surely, they knew why they were celebrating, in spite of the strike and despite rumours that they were about to lose their positions at the helm of the university. That life is larger than logic, and reality richer than meets the senses could hardly have been better substantiated than in the war of the vultures.

Constance, firmness and ruthlessness are the names of their game. One must never yield to blackmail of any kind, and exemplary lessons must be administered to whoever attempts to force the hand of the state and its subsidiaries in matters where discipline and order are expected of all and sundry. And for power to sleep calmly at night or to be able to go on mission now and again without fear of losing its reigns, the flower of hatred, backstabbing and animosity must be carefully cultivated and allowed to blossom with impunity. It is the triumph of such a philosophy that explains why the air in the University of Mimbo is full of blood dripping fiends and devils each seeking to outdo the other in the interest of things as they are or things to come. The state to them is game to be hunted and eaten, and hunters shall seek to outhunt hunters until nothing is left to hunt. They clamour for positions and sterile influence, and poach with impunity for sex with the female students they ambush with marks, cash and the lure and allure of powering action and power in waiting. In this way, the University of Mimbo is a place for everything but teaching, learning and researching. Little wonder that the few who attempt genuine scholarship are scorned and made to feel guilty and impertinent.

Those who insist on these are axed or have fallen in battle like cockroaches sprayed with insecticide. Intellectual mediocrity continues as the forces of darkness claim centre stage, refusing to acknowledge the light they cannot see. They sing, dance and jubilate, warning all those who dare to tinker with things: 'Fowl wey ye no dey hear shiiii go hear mbam'. With such destructive fury of arrogance wedded to ignorance, how can they be made to see the need to vanquish injustice with the lantern of fearlessness and the torrential down-pour of outspokenness? Do they feel the weight of the excruciating pain of intellectual corruption? Whatever happened to the rhetoric of the university as the shrine of meritocracy, intellectual freedom and social responsibility? How can they be made to see that the soil on which the University of Mimbo stands belongs to the sons and daughters of the nation of Mimbo, wherever their umbilical cords are buried? How can they be

made to translate into lived reality the national credo of unity in diversity? How can they convince others that the land of Mimbo is Africa in miniature when within that land nothing embeds the other in miniature?

The fact that the university is sick, almost in a coma, and on a life support machine hardly worries a soul in power, as it has never been the idea that students and staff, research, learning and teaching should stand in the way of the task of university administration. It is less a place that is than a place to be.

How could things be any different at the University of Mimbo when Mimboland as a country is hostage to the same ambitions of dominance and impunity? Just how could things be different when things are the same everywhere else? If power without responsibility is the game of the day, why should one expect the university to play a game of its own? The arrogant insensitivity of Longstay and his powerful elite must be attacked and defeated for the suffering students and people to be freed of their predicaments. *The Talking Drum* challenges the critical intelligentsia to stand up and be counted in the interest of the people. Those of them who continue to opt for shortcuts to power, privilege and comfort to the detriment of ordinary Mimbolanders shall have themselves to blame the day the people say enough is enough.

* * *

Banging on the door woke Bobinga Iroko up. It was only then that he realized he had fallen asleep on the couch in his parlour. He rubbed his eyes to clear them of unfinished sleep, and went to open the door.

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed when he saw Lilly Loveless. "What are you doing here this early in the morning? He stepped aside for her to come in. He offered her a seat and continued: "Don't you have any respect for those who work hard and sleep late back where you come from?"

"Sorry for waking you up," Lilly Loveless apologised. "But I leave tomorrow, and last night I couldn't sleep."

"I know you leave tomorrow, but why on earth couldn't you sleep? Did someone steal your bed or something?"

"You are always joking, Bobinga Iroko, but can't you be serious for once in your life?"

"I'm most serious when joking, and most joking when serious, believe it or not."

"Do you realize that I have talked to everyone, interviewed all and sundry, close and distant, with the exception of my closest male friend of all, you?"

"What about that?"

"I have come to interview you," said Lilly Loveless. "For nearly six months that I have been here, not once have you suggested taking me to see where you live, not a word have you uttered about your family, not a single suggestion whether or not you are married. I have deliberately steered away from asking, hoping that you'd tell me on your own accord, open the doors of your heart to me as a friend, but I have waited in vain. Tomorrow I leave, and it appears I may well have left without any initiative from you in this connection, which is why I decided to take the bull by the horns this morning."

"Wow" said Bobinga Iroko, sitting down. "Forceful lady you are. So what are you going to do with your bull?"

"I want to open it up and get to know it better. The bull can't be as aloof and as dangerous as we make it appear when we dangle a red cloth in front of it, can it?"

"That's for you to say," replied Bobinga Iroko. "You are the researcher."

"That's why I have come to ask you questions about yourself, similar to the questions I have asked others," said Lilly Loveless, enthusiastically.

"Is that the only form of research you know? Asking questions in face to face interviews?"

"What other forms are there, in finding out who Bobinga Iroko is, whether or not you are married, how many times you've played the Mboma and with what results, etc...? Have you never heard the saying that only a man knows what lives in the heart of his heart?"

Bobinga Iroko laughed and said: "If that's the only way you have for finding out, then there should at least be one Mimbolander whose private life is not going to accompany you tomorrow to Muzunguland." There was a note of finality in his voice.

"What?" Lilly Loveless couldn't believe her ears. "Are you serious?"

"Do I appear as if I am joking?"

"It's unheard of," Lilly Loveless protested.

"It is not unheard of with Bobinga Iroko," he reposted.

"What's the difference anyway, as far as you are concerned?"

Lilly Loveless stood to leave, disappointed.

"Drinks and food on me today, at Mountain Valley," said Bobinga Iroko, "6pm sharp. Bring your appetite with you. Come along with Britney, Desire and whoever else you feel like inviting. And tomorrow, I'll feel insulted if you go to the airport by taxi. I'm taking the day off for you, Lilly Loveless."

Lilly Loveless turned and walked out, tears in her eyes. She stopped briefly in the yard, almost beckoned for the guard, but changed her mind: she wouldn't descend that low to ask a guard for information that Bobinga Iroko himself should provide. She walked away in a mixture of anger, frustration and burning desire.

Bobinga Iroko and Britney were on time to take Lilly Loveless to the airport in Bobinga Iroko's car. But Lilly Loveless just could not bring herself to leave without saying goodbye to Prince Anointed of the Archives. At the farewell drinks and food offered by Bobinga Iroko at Mountain Valley, everyone close was present except the Prince. It had completely escaped Bobinga Iroko's mind to invite him as well. She pleaded with Bobinga Iroko to rush her to the Archives, which he did. It was the only way he could make it up to Lilly Loveless who was disappointed that he had not thought of inviting Prince Anointed.

It was an emotional farewell meeting, between Prince Anointed and Lilly Loveless. The Prince, showing off his new front teeth in a broad smile, asked her to remember what she had promised to do to save the Archives. His warmth reached out to her, and with it an envelope.

"I dug this up from some files," he smiled. "I was going through old copies of *The Talking Drum* and came by the story in there."

"What is the story?" Lilly Loveless asked, curious to open the envelope.

"Not here, don't open it here," Prince Anointed stopped her. "It is considered impolite for a gift to be unwrapped in front of the person who has offered it."

"OK then," Lilly Loveless yielded. "I'll open it at the airport, when I have checked in and am seated in the plane."

She embraced him warmly and left, promising to keep in touch and to keep active on raising funds to save the Archives.

Once outside the Archives, Lilly Loveless jumped into Bobinga Iroko's waiting car, where he and Britney were growing impatient, as it was getting late and they didn't want her missing her flight. Bobinga Iroko drove like a highway robber being pursued by the police. If they failed to cross the Bonaprim Bridge before the rush hours, it was likely to take them more than two hours simply to go through the heart of the city, and Lilly Loveless would certainly miss her flight.

Fortunately, they made it, but only just. They arrived at the Sawang International Airport. Bobinga Iroko and Britney dropped her off at Departures, kissed her goodbye, and drove off to Ndolo beach, which they agreed to do when Lilly Loveless was in the Archives wishing Prince Anointed goodbye, and only after Britney told Bobinga Iroko: "You owe me a day at the beach." It was the start of a long weekend, and they both felt like discovering Ndolo beach, a place they'd heard so much of. Britney had just been paid by Lilly Loveless, and Bobinga Iroko had just taken his salary for the month, so they had no money problems to about.

Britney felt empty. Parting with Lilly Loveless was not easy. They had known each other and worked together for six months. They had become more than close. Her sense of emptiness had to do with the vulnerability she felt towards Lilly Loveless. Britney had fed her story upon story. And now Lilly Loveless was taking them away. She had laboured for months to gather and retell them. Lilly Loveless had loaded them into her digital recorder, notebook, and laptop and was going to fly away with them. She felt emptied,

like a mother having her baby snatched away. She appreciated the sustenance working for Lilly Loveless had provided, but she wondered how the stories would be used. Of course they could not be valued in purely monetary terms. Images of Judas Iscariot and his thirty pieces of silver flashed through her mind, piercing her with guilt. Would those whose stories she had shared with Lilly Loveless have condoned her action had their opinion been sought beforehand? Had she told Lilly Loveless more than she needed to know? Would Lilly Loveless ever truly acknowledge her efforts? This degree she would get in Muzunguland, what would it bring her? What doors would it open, or close? Would Lilly Loveless respect the privacy and confidentiality of those who had so generously assisted her with her research? How would Lilly Loveless use the material she had gathered? Would she reach the right conclusions or would she merely reproduce practiced stereotypes of Africans? Would she be confident and careful enough to send back for comments what she would write? Would they ever meet again? When, where, how? What if Lilly Loveless never bothered to write back? Britney felt shaky as she wondered about what she had done with Lilly Loveless.

As for Lilly Loveless, she was barely in time to check in, and rush through passport control. She disregarded the beep of the metal detector through which she had just stepped and reached for her laptop, coming out of the X-ray machine in a basket. Before she could get to it a short, well built woman in uniform asked in a deep voice, "May I body search you?" She extended her arms to show the position the search should assume.

The buxom woman patted one arm and then the other, from wrist to armpit. Lilly Loveless followed her movements with her eyes. Then the woman, pressing her breasts into Lilly Loveless, reached around to pat down her spine, from her neck to her waist. Lilly Loveless moved nothing except her face muscles that forced her eyes open and her eyebrows up in surprise. She felt a hardening sensation on the tips of her breasts. She wondered if the intimacy she felt was imagined on her part or intended by the other woman. And she tried to imagine how close the short-armed women would have to get to search a woman more robust than herself.

Lilly Loveless felt the pressure let up when the woman brought her hands around to the front of her waist and stopped at something bulky. Lilly Loveless lifted her blouse to reveal a cell phone clipped to the waistline of her trousers, a clear sign she had gone native, as no Muzungu woman would ordinarily ever wear her cell phone on her waist. It was the case six months ago that, like other Muzungu women, she would make merciless fun of men who wore their cell phones in this way. She would also instinctively have known that she had to take off her cell phone before going through the x-ray machine. The uniformed woman continued her search down to both ankles, stood up, winked and nodded to let Lilly Loveless know she was free to go.

As Lilly Loveless put her laptop back into its bag, she wondered if the woman was just going through her routines or if she was finding ways to relish the routine. Full of many more questions and few answers after months in Mimboland, Lilly Loveless followed the signs to the gate indicated on her boarding pass.

Once seated in the plane, she made her last phone calls, starting first with Bobinga Iroko. She thanked him again and again for all the support she received during her stay, and especially for being a very good friend. "You

must come and visit me in Muzunguland," she insisted, promising to watch out for opportunities for him to come for seminars or conferences, or to apply for fellowships. "When you come, you must tell me your own story", she insisted. "You say there should at least be one secret in Mimboland, which I am not taking back to Muzunguland. My question to you is: "Why should that story be that of my best friend in Mimboland? Aren't friends supposed to share secrets?" She laughed. "How many of my own secrets have I told you?" She giggled. "How many of them have I not told you?" She laughed when Bobinga Iroko told her of the half full box of condoms she forgot in the car. "No, I didn't forget them," she said. "I left them just in case you need them..." The conversation went on for 20 minutes, then she said farewell, promising to email and phone. She barely had enough airtime left to ask him to give Britney her love.

As soon as she stopped phoning, Lilly Loveless looked up and recognised Yoyette, the stewardess she flew out with six months ago. Yoyette noticed her and came over. They were both pleasantly surprised by the coincidence. They exchanged news and Lilly Loveless promised to tell Yoyette more about her research and stay in Mimboland, in the course of the flight.

A delay in take off made Lilly Loveless ask: "What's the problem? Why are we not taking off?"

"Because there's a problem closing the bulkhead, so they have to take out the luggage and put it back again," explained Yoyette.

"Actually, I just saw someone running up to the plane with a screwdriver," said Lilly Loveless, looking out of the window.

"Good," said Yoyette. "Then they're probably screwing it up," she added and walked down the aisle to continue getting the plane ready for take off.

* * *

Lilly Loveless remembered the envelope Prince Anointed gave her. Her curiosity surged.

She hurriedly opened the envelope and saw a newspaper clipping from *The Talking Drum*. The article, titled: "In Sickness and In Health", was over six years old.

"Why did Prince Anointed give me this?" Lilly Loveless asked herself, then started reading:

'Growing up in Sakersbeach, Loveline developed a passion for nature very early in life. She loved the beach and adored walking in the gardens. Amid the rough and tumble of bubbly Sakersbeach, Loveline could hardly see what the future held for her, but she was determined to succeed in life. She was a natural beauty. Her streamlined body, trendy long legs, ebony complexion and bedroom eyes could as well have constituted a liability and a distraction to her high objectives, but her brains were there to steer her through very trying moments.

'It took all the fortitude Loveline could muster to complete her studies at the University of Mimbo where beauty could be both a blessing and a curse. With her brains and determination, at 22 she graduated with a degree in Accounting after the statutory period of three years, and two years later found a job with a newly opened bank by the God's Soldiers of Capital

Church.

'That was where she first met 28 years old Godlove, a journalist and stringer for several Muzungu news services. Godlove had come to open an account. With a Masters in Journalism from the renowned Pulitzer University of Muzunguland, Godlove was thought to have made a courageous and patriotic decision to return to work and live in Mimboland in spite of more attractive pastures elsewhere.

'As he waited for the paper work to open the account, Godlove could not take his inquisitive large eyes off Loveline who was talking to another customer. Even his oversized ears seemed resolutely determined to capture any sound she made. She must have noticed his endless staring and neck stretching, but she paid no attention. This happened all the time, the eyes of men desperately and shamelessly feeding off her looks without her permission. But this was to turn out to be the chanced meeting that marked the beginning of a serious relationship.

'Godlove carried the mental image of Loveline home with him. He did his homework, gathering every piece of information he could on Loveline, and what he learned so impressed him that by the time he had managed to extract a first date from her, he had fallen hopelessly in love with Loveline.

'Their date was at the beach, and Godlove was glad to read meaning into the fact that Loveline had come unaccompanied. She yielded effortlessly to his overtures for a conversation and they talked for hours, about their likes and dislikes, their dreams and disappointments, the future. They talked like people who had known each other for long, and like children nourished with fairy tales. By the end of that outing there was a mutual desire to see each other again and again. Soon, they lingered over seeing each other, drawing sustenance from the energy of loving and being loved. Godlove cared about Loveline's good and friendly nature and she was captivated by his height, elegance, humour and dark skin which complemented so eloquently her ebony complexion. One thing led to another. Soon, they started seeing big, planning big, thinking absolutes, and submitting to the logic of the heart.

'Godlove's courtship was impassioned, sincere and inspired by the same Muzunguland classics in matters of the heart that had won him his first love during his student days. He would call and thrill Loveline with his sudden insane creative desires to please. They realised that they shared a lot in common - their love for outdoor games and activities, especially tennis, swimming, beachcombing and simply brightening up the city with the fact of being in love. The two became romantically embedded; they were always together, at the beach, at church, at parties, at nightclubs, they were just inseparable.

'It didn't take Godlove more than a few months to pop the big question -would Loveline care to spend the rest of her life with him? However much one expects this question, there is always an element of surprise when it is actually posed. This was the same for Loveline, who expressed cautious enthusiasm: "Don't you think that's a little rushed? We barely know each other, and the more I know about you the more I feel there is to know." Loveline loved Godlove, but she found his pace a little ahead of her. Or was it simply the fear that he might change irrecongnisably once they were married? She had read and heard and witnessed women complain how

much the men they married had fast become strange bedfellows. But Godlove was a man of unyielding resolve, persistence and insistence. Eventually, she was persuaded, reluctantly. It wasn't always that one came by a man with whom it clicked so well, although it was in her nature not to rush into things.

'The couple decided the day for the exchange of vows would be July 14, to coincide with the day when Loveline was baptized as a baby some 24 years earlier. They decided on the venue as well, the Pentecostal God's Soldiers of Capital Church in Manawabay, another concession Godlove easily made in spite of his strong feelings for the Presbyterian Church in Pawa-Town where he had worshipped in his childhood with his parents.

'They had only five months to prepare for the big day. There were invitations to send, clothes to buy, a thousand and one things to do. Loveline was nervous. She wanted to choose the trendiest wedding dress, and the perfect shoes to go with it, all imported from Muzunguland where her elder brother was studying and moonlighting to make ends meet. She was lucky to have her bosom childhood friend, Ndolo, by her side and as her chief bride's maid. There was little time to do all there was to do, but with the help of friends, preparations went so smoothly that everything was in place a week to time.

'Well, almost everything. An important detail was outstanding: Loveline's bridal gown was still in Muzunguland. Her elder brother, Lambert, a bushfaller, had promised to fly in from Muzunguland with it in time for the wedding. With Loveline's father dead, Lambert had been designated as the person to give the bride's hand in marriage, and had offered to make the gown for his sister as his wedding present. So the couple was getting anxious. Lambert had still not called to confirm the date of his arrival. But on July 10, he called Godlove to say he had some problems with his travelling documents, problems that he was just from sorting out. He would be landing at the Sawang International Airport the following day by an Air-Mimbo flight.

'Godlove decided to pick Lambert up from the airport. Loveline insisted on accompanying him despite his efforts to dissuade her.

'Godlove was driving responsibly. Somewhere along the way, it started raining and soon, the downpour was so heavy that it rendered visibility very poor.

'Godlove did not notice an oncoming timber tanker loaded beyond capacity with Bobinga and Iroko until it was only inches away from his car. Impulsively, he turned the steering-wheel to the right hoping to veer off the tanker's course. The car swerved, but the tanker hit its rear end, violently. The impact of the collision was so great it sent Godlove's Toyota Corolla crashing down a ravine. The tanker skidded off the road and came to a halt some twenty yards away. Its occupants – the driver and his motor boy, got out and rushed to the rescue of the passengers in the smaller vehicle.

'Both were unconscious. Godlove was pulled out first. He was not much hurt thanks to the safety belt. He had a few cuts from shards of broken windshield. It was more difficult getting Loveline out of the wrecked car. Her right leg was caught between the door and the stump of a tree and part of the weight of the car rested on it. She was also losing much blood.

'They were rushed to the nearest hospital where they were given urgent attention. Godlove came round after a few hours and asked to be

discharged so he could go around arranging for Loveline's evacuation, and to inform family and friends of what had happened. Loveline was still in bad shape.

'Arrangements were promptly made for Loveline's transfer to a private orthopaedic surgeon in Sawang. Mekemewel was a very sympathetic doctor who took great interest in the physical and mental state of his patients. He had operated upon hundreds of patients with the most intractable bone damages and had come off with wonderfully edifying results, some of which were qualified as near miracles.

'Loveline's case, however, proved very difficult. That morning Doctor Mekemewel invited Godlove into his office. "I know how much you love your wife-to-be, but we must act fast in her interest. We've got only eight hours to carry out a knee-down amputation or risk a complication." Godlove was alarmed. He fought back hot tears. "I don't mean to question your competence Doctor, but you mean absolutely nothing can be done to save the leg?"

'Doctor Mekemewel shook his head, got up and placed a hand on Godlove's shoulder. "I have always made it a policy to do all I can to patch up a broken arm or leg because I know how greatly people value their beauty. When I looked at your wife's beautiful face, it caused me great pain to know nothing can be done to give her back her leg. Her entire tibia was shattered with the bone buried inside flesh. All the marrow has leaked too. An amputation is always the last resort. I'm sorry. You have to sign these."

'He handed Godlove several forms. Godlove wept. It all seemed like a bad dream to him. Only a few hours ago they were a happy and wholesome couple with so much *joie de vivre*. They were so full of life, savouring its most intricate pleasures but now they were so empty that they would be lucky to find their happiness again. Godlove was still sobbing when Loveline's mother, her brother Lambert and her friend Ndolo came in. It was a moment of emotional let-go.

'When everyone calmed down, Loveline's mother asked to see her daughter. They were let in, but Loveline had still not regained consciousness so it made no difference whether they stayed or left. Godlove drew their attention to the forms he had been asked to sign and would have gladly let someone else take the responsibility. Lambert refused, saying Godlove was best placed to sign, as Loveline was all but his wife.

'Loveline's first hospital days were nerve-wrenching. When she realised her leg had been amputated, she was disconsolate. She wept for days on end and refused to eat. She needed strong sedatives to send her to sleep each night. But gradually she resigned herself to her fate. She also enjoyed great support from family and friends. Godlove was risking his job to keep her company. He was always by her side and occasionally, when she cried, he could not stop himself from crying too. He showered her with flowers, presents and love, reassuring her they would be alright and just as happy again. Ndolo was always by her friend. She did much of the cooking, helped clean up her friend and read comforting stories to boost her morale. Lambert stayed for two weeks and had to go back to Muzunguland, as work and studies beckoned. Loveline's mother was asked to leave so the crying would lessen.

'When Loveline left the hospital, she chose to do her rehabilitation in

Pawa-Town where she could spend time in the company of her aunt. Godlove would visit her on weekends, staying with her from Friday to Sunday. Then he would drive back to Sakersbeach.

'Life became very different for Godlove. Whenever he got back home, he would lock himself indoors and would not go out again.

'After two months of living this way, the full force of his loneliness threatened to overwhelm him. His health was also waning and he was losing interest in life. He would not go swimming and would not play tennis because doing these things made him think of Loveline.

'When Loveline eventually came back to Sakersbeach, it didn't improve the situation. If anything, it made Godlove lonelier than ever. Loveline sulked endlessly, and grew very moody. Godlove spent his days by her side trying to comfort her. He was by nature an outdoors man and his new lifestyle trying.

'Godlove also discovered that something had changed in his feelings for Loveline. Where he had experienced strong passionate love, he now found empathy and brotherly affection, almost pity. Instead of the delight that bedtime used to be, it became endless hours of remonstrance and guilt.

'One evening when Ndolo came to visit, Godlove offered to take her back in his car. On the way he offered her a drink and they started talking. Godlove poured out his soul: "I don't feel its right to get married out of pity, Ndolo. I'm afraid I no longer know what I feel for Loveline. You know how it used to be with us, but things are no longer the same. Loveline is making it even more difficult for me. She keeps saying she is not half the woman she used to be and it is killing me. I understand what she is going through, but I can't go on living like this."

'Ndolo went home that day knowing that her friend's wedding wouldn't be very soon. She felt she understood Godlove's feelings but she felt strongly for her friend too. Whatever was the case, she decided she would let Godlove know that it was not the moment to relinquish his support because Loveline's mind was still very fragile. Ndolo decided she would talk to Godlove the following day.

'He wasn't in his office when she called, but he had left a note asking anyone who wished to see him to call at the Manawabay Bar where he would be spending break time. She found him at a loner's corner sipping his drink. She noticed without comment the fact that he was drinking beer, something he had vowed never to do because he didn't want to be like every other man in Mimboland.

'Godlove offered her a drink that she accepted. Ndolo couldn't find the right words to address her thoughts without hurting Godlove, so she just sat there staring at the handsome guy who looked downcast and she wished she could cheer him up.

"You see, Ndolo, I no longer go home during break. I come here to drink and talk to myself like a mad man."

The soft, enchanting voice of Grace Decca asking for "a little love - ndolo" filtered through from the Hi-fi sound system behind the bar.

"Want to dance?" Godlove invited Ndolo with his prominent eyes. She obliged and Godlove held her close and felt warmth. He could feel her heart pounding hard against his yearning ribs. He kissed her. She tried to resist, but he held her firmly.

"This is not right Godlove!"

"I know Ndolo. But some of life's greatest pleasures are not right."

"Then he kissed her again, this time tenderly, passionately, longingly. Ndolo let her mind journey into the realm of seductive surrender. She did not try to resist. She told herself in the excited silence of her thoughts: One thing about time is that it passes never to return. It cannot be recalled, run after or overtaken. You can choose to use, misuse or completely waste it. But you can never bring it back. Her options had never been clearer.

"Godlove ... Godlove ..."

"Call me Bobinga Iroko, from now on. I need the combined strength of the best Bobinga and Iroko from the heart of the rainforest to face the fact that the Godlove in me is no more..."

"So that is how he came to be called Bobinga Iroko" Lilly Loveless murmured, perplexed. "What a story! I see why he didn't want to tell me... Where would he begin? Such a sad, traumatizing experience... Poor Godlove... I wonder what became of Loveline... Ndolo.... Love... Getting personal information from Bobinga Iroko is like trying to pound water with a pestle... I should send Prince Anointed an email to sniff around for more about this intriguing man..."

* * *

"Everyone is served now, and I can sit with you for a couple of minutes before duty calls again. Here are a couple of Mim-Wandas and a bottle of Mim-Wata for your flying comfort," said Yoyette, taking the empty aisle seat next to Lilly Loveless.

"Thanks," said Lilly Loveless, opening a can of Mim-Wanda.

"Did your research go well? Did you learn much?"

"You'd be surprised, Yoyette, to learn how much playing around there is," said Lilly Loveless, turning to her.

Yoyette smiled and said, "Lilly Loveless, you may know what happens on the ground, but I know what happens up here in the skies."

"Really?" asked Lilly Loveless musingly, thinking she had completed her fieldwork and deserved a restful flight and in the same instant realising it probably doesn't end until you submit your thesis and move on to another project. "So what happens up here that would surprise me?"

"Probably the same thing that happens down there, just that no one would suspect it happening up here."

"Tell me," said Lilly Loveless, sipping her Mim-Wanda.

"People who like danger, spontaneity and the risk of discovery indulge themselves fleetingly during the freedom of flying," began Yoyette. Staring straight at Lilly Loveless, she suggested, "Look discretely at the couple just behind us in the four middle seats. You can't see much because of the blankets, but I know from experience that something will soon be happening there."

Lilly Loveless, saturated with stories, thought she had heard all there was to hear about these things. On second thought, she was acutely aware of the fact that some of the most valuable information in research came from the most unlikely sources, times or places. So she gave Yoyette the benefit of the doubt.

"You'd be surprised by how much non verbal communication

happens during the flight," Yoyette continued. "A man or a woman may even fondle a complete stranger. And more than once I've seen a woman stand to go to the toilet. It doesn't take long before the fondler follows."

Lilly Loveless was sceptical. Scanning her memory, she couldn't recall even once waiting for the toilet on the plane, seeing someone come out to shut the door behind him or her, and hearing it relock from within.

"Hmm..." said Lilly Loveless, "they must do it when the toilets are not in demand."

"You seem to know something about it," chuckled Yoyette. "Don't tell me you're a member of the Mile High Club. They start early and rise as we gain in elevation," she concluded jokingly.

"Some kind of levitation!" rejoined Lilly Loveless.

"Be Loveless as you may, you really are lovely Lilly," said Yoyette. She stood up, retrieved the empty coffee cup from Lilly Loveless and sauntered back up to the mini-kitchen across from the toilet.

Lilly Loveless wondered what Yoyette would have said if she had yielded to the urge to ask her if she had ever been approached by passengers hungry for quickies in flight. This was a missed opportunity, as Lilly Loveless was well aware that informants sometimes shared their own stories as if these were the stories of others and the stories of others as if these were their own.

Lilly Loveless fell asleep soon after lunch. The Mim-Wanda was what she needed to digest the thoughts raising in her mind from reading Bobinga Iroko's story. In her sleep she dreamt of Ndolo... of Bobinga Iroko... of Britney...

* * *

The touchdown at Bruhlville International Airport was on time, despite the delayed takeoff from Mimboland. It was wintry weather, and Lilly Loveless hoped that her Mom was there with a coat to fetch her, as she promised she would be. Lilly Loveless was looking forward to the reunion, and to sharing some details of her beautiful experience of Mimboland with her mom.

When she came through arrivals it wasn't her mom she saw waiting for her.

"What are you doing here," she asked Martin, after ignoring his words of welcome and attempts to embrace her.

"Your mom asked me to come for you in her place", Martin tried to explain, almost running after Lilly Loveless who was walking very fast towards the train.

"You should have told her no," Lilly Loveless protested.

"I tried."

"Not hard enough."

"You know what your mom is like..."

"And you know what Lilly Loveless is like..."

"I can live with that." Martin paused for a while, then added: "Count me out as you may, I simply refuse to be knocked out."

"Dream on."

"As they say in Mimboland, the fact that the teeth occasionally bite the tongue does not mean that they cannot cooperate," said Martin.

Lilly Loveless looked at him with questioning surprise.

"The nose and the mouth are too close to be enemies," added Martin, quoting yet again from *Time Heals Even the Deepest Wounds*, the Mimboland novel he had just finished reading.

They were just on time to catch the train to Bruhlville.

Three weeks after her return to Bruhlville, Lilly Loveless sent Britney this email:

Dear Britney,

This is to say an awful lot of things at the same time: Merry Christmas, a Happy New Year and thank you for being my friend. You have been a real inspiration and it is wonderful to be so close to you. I do hope that you will enjoy Puttkamerstown and its contagious warm and charm without me. I am very happy that I met you and there is no doubt in my mind that you will always be with me whatever or wherever I am.

In Mimboland I learnt so much about food processors, blenders and blending for love and desire. What I desperately need now is a word blender to make word pulp that my supervisors can recognise and relish... Have you ever known someone who only takes notes and never writes anything? I'm beginning to fear I'm that person... Let me not bore you with my academic headaches.

I am snuggled up in bed, with a cup of warm cocoa and rum, emailing you while I try to warm up a bit before sleeping. I am cold through to the bone: the weather has changed from warm and sunny (relatively speaking) to real winter, with snow (which 'brings a touch of purity to a rather dirty Muzungu world,' in the words of Bobinga Iroko – how is he doing, by the way?) and hale and icy winds, in only a few days' time. I have been racing through all of it on my bicycle, on my way to various appointments and am very glad indeed to be where I am right now. If you come to Muzunguland in wintertime, I will spoil you with all kinds of warm drinks (– do you like cocoa? mine is very good – lots of chocolate and lots of rummmm, but no Mimbo-Wanda) – cold winters can be very cosy, too, and fun: snow, ice, plenty of light...

As I read the last bits of *Time Heals Even the Deepest Wounds*, one of the Mimboland novels you advised me to buy and take back with me, where the author whines lyrical about Africa and its beautiful and humanising night noises, something snapped in me in a sneaky, longing kind of way to remind me that I am not home at Puttkamerstown. It's quiet at night here... no animal noises – dogs barking, owls hooting, birds chirping in the morning. One forgets how these noises are tied with one's routines until they are not there. Damn I miss that. No, I am not all tears... not yet anyway. I have to make-do with emergency sirens and student party noises or the police checking them out because some discerning neighbours complained. Oh and the intercom when some flatmates get late night visitors. Can't have it all in this life. It's only now I get the full meaning of the saying that home is where the heart is. I am sure your dreams are at that point when they are sweetest as I write. Enjoy...

Love

Lilly Loveless

Some three months or so later, despite vigorous objection by Martin who felt that, if anything, she should be inviting a female academic, Lilly

Loveless emailed Bobinga Iroko as follows:

Dear Godlove,
I hope this email finds you well.

I will never forget the warm welcome I received in Puttkamerstown during my fieldwork, although my Mom still can't fathom why I'm so drawn to Africa, "despite its many dangers." Not to mention my Bobinga Iroko: How could I ever forget you – especially when you are not grumpy? You're nicer when you're lively, happy, laughing, dancing, and tickling me intellectually.

My dissertation is in a lamentable state, due probably to my confusion over the wealth and gaps in data on certain aspects, and my lack of a suitable framework for making sense of things. For months, I have wanted to contact you to seek your advice and wisdom, only to find myself increasingly disappointed with what I have managed to achieve, which prevented me from making this step before.

I hate to have to write to you with such desperate urgency, but the situation over here has become agonising. Not wanting to sound like a sycophant, the truth is that you are the most inspiring person I have ever met. I find Muzunguland academics arrogant and contemptuous. I didn't get along with my supervisors, and have been without supervision for some months now.

To cut a long story short, my supervisors criticized me for inadequately documenting male sexuality, for focusing too narrowly on infidelity and on relationships between married men and younger women, and for overly relying on anecdotes and the opinions of my research assistant and a handful of others. I found the criticism too harsh, and I tried and failed to convince them to let me redefine my research topic to suit the data I had collected. They insisted that even if I did, there was little guarantee the work would satisfy the minimum requirements for the award of the PhD. I don't want to see all the work go down the drain, so I appealed to the faculty research committee, and have been granted permission to complete my writing and submit the thesis for examination by a specially constituted committee of experts in the field. If I can complete the work in timely fashion and am lucky, it is possible Dr Wiseman Lovemore could be invited as the external examiner from Africa, as I have been asked for a list of African experts in the field. You can well imagine how much I am praying and have added my voice to advocates of academic freedom mobilizing the international community for his expedient release from prison. But let's cross that bridge when we get there.

First, I must hand in my dissertation in a couple of months, to stand a chance of it being examined this academic year. I take courage in what you told me in your car on our way back from Nyamandem, that writing, like driving in difficult terrain, must never be a one person show. I would do anything to have you help me (plane tickets, a hotel in Bruhlville, and all other expenses on me!). I have attached the document on which I am currently working. Again I must apologise for all the holes in it. Do you think you would be able to spare some time to help me with this as soon as possible? Please. A positive response from you would be like sunshine on a gloomy day. I will be forever in your debt.

Love,

Lilly Loveless

“This is perhaps Francis Nyamnjoh’s boldest and most ambitious novel yet.... His writings are pushing the boundaries of discourse in literary and scholarly fields.”

- Dr Wangui wa Goro, Critic and Translator

Married But Available ventures into a theme about which people say as much as they withhold. It explores intersections between sex, money and power, challenging orthodoxies, revealing complexities and providing insights into the politics and economics of relationships. During six months of fieldwork in Mimboland, Lilly Loveless, a Muzungulander doctoral student in Social Geography, researches how sex shapes and is shaped by power and consumerism in Africa. The bulk of her research takes place on the outskirts of the University of Mimbo, an institution where nothing is what it seems. Through her astounding harvest of encounters, interviews, conversations and observations, the reader gets a captivating glimpse into the frailty and resilience of human beings and society. Lilly Loveless comes out of it all well and truly baptized. And so does the reader!

Francis B. Nyamnjoh has taught Sociology, Anthropology and Communication Studies at universities in Cameroon, Botswana and South Africa. He is currently Head of Publications with the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Dakar, Senegal.

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